Introduction

“Il teatro significa vivere sul serio quello che gli altri nella vita recitano male.”

Many years ago a young boy sat with his friend, the son of a lawyer, in the Corte Minorile of Naples, watching as petty criminals about his age were being judged for their offenses. One ragged pick-pocket who had been found guilty demanded to be led away after being sentenced; instead he was left there and his loud pleas were completely disregarded. Unwilling to tolerate this final offense of being treated as though he were invisible, the juvenile delinquent, in an extreme act of rebellion, began smashing the chains around his hands against his own head until his face was a mask of blood. Horrified, the judge finally ordered everybody out of the court.

That young boy sitting in court watching the gruesome scene was Eduardo De Filippo and the sense of helplessness and social injustice witnessed left an indelible mark on the impressionable mind of the future playwright. Almost sixty years later, at the Accademia dei Lincei, as he accepted the Premio Internazionale Feltrinelli, one of Italy’s highest literary accolades, De Filippo recalled how it was that this early image of the individual pitted against society was always at the basis of his work:

Alla base del mio teatro c’è sempre il conflitto fra individuo e società [...] tutto ha inizio, sempre, da uno stimolo emotivo: reazione a un’ingiustizia, sdegno per l’ipocrisia mia e altrui, solidarietà e simpatia umana per una persona o un gruppo di persone, ribellione contro leggi superate e anacronistiche con il mondo di oggi, sgomento di fronte a fatti che, come le guerre, sconvolgono la vita dei popoli.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: to provide for the first time a translation of Eduardo’s last play, Gli esami non finiscono mai (Exams Never End), and to trace the development of his dramatic style and philosophy in order to appreciate their culmination.

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in his work. My aim is to illustrate the reasons behind De Filippo’s move from the farces in the twenties to the existential reflections in his last work. In doing so, this thesis proposes to reveal Eduardo as a much deeper playwright than is generally acknowledged. *Gli esami* can thus be seen as both the starting point and the finishing point of the thesis, and the translation will have its own preface. My intention in this *Introduction* is to set out the sources and methodology adopted in the body of the thesis.

The primary sources of this thesis are the plays, as they were collected by Eduardo himself and published by Einaudi in *Cantata dei giorni pari* and *Cantata dei giorni dispari* together with reflections on his work, some short, some much longer, by the dramatist himself. The plays are looked at and weighed in the light of an extensive body of secondary material: biographies, journalistic comments, theatre criticism, and academic reviews. From the 1930s, Eduardo’s theatre attracted reviews, first in the Neapolitan and then in the national press. A vast collection of this material was made available to me by the Eduardo De Filippo Archive in Naples which has systematically collected all the reviews on Eduardo De Filippo worldwide, and from it we can see that while he is featured on the “spettacolo” pages of the daily newspapers as early as 1932, in an article by Massimo Bontempelli, who claimed that he was addicted to Eduardo’s theatre company “ho il vizio della compagnia De Filippo,” he was soon promoted in drama journals as well. In 1956 an entire issue of *Sipario* (n. 119) was dedicated to him and during this period, he began to attract serious attention abroad of critics such as Eric Bentley who claimed in 1951 that Eduardo was the true heir of the *commedia dell’arte.* The English theatre critic was particularly impressed by Eduardo’s atypical and ‘un-Italian’ manner of performing:

Eduardo on stage is an astonishment. For five minutes or so he may be a complete let-down. This is not acting at all, we cry, above all it is not Italian acting! Voice and body are so quiet. Pianissimo. No glamour, no effusion of brilliance. No attempt to lift the role

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off the ground by oratory and stylization, no attempt to thrust it at us by force of personality.6

Eduardo’s reputation continues to grow. In 1987, three years after the dramatist’s death, Dario Fo, held up his extraordinary acting style as an example for his students: “tutto era inventato in una straordinaria sintesi ed economia […] e t’inchiodava alla sedia.”7 Above all, Eduardo observed and represented a particular aspect of Italian life. It was during the speech at the Accademia dei Lincei, that De Filippo revealed the important role that observation played both for his writing and his acting:

Occhi e orrechie mie sono stati asserviti da sempre – e non esagero – a uno spirito di osservazione instancabile, ossessivo, che mi ha tenuto e mi tiene inchiodato al mio prossimo e che mi porta a lasciarmi affascinare dal modo d’essere e di esprimersi dell’umanità. Solo perché ho assorbito avidamente, e con pietà, la vita di tanta gente, ho potuto creare un linguaggio che, sebbene elaborato teatralmente, diventa mezzo di espressione dei vari personaggi e non del solo autore.8

Just one month before his death, as he accepted the Premio Taormina, Eduardo emphasized the importance of his strong work ethic: “Fare teatro sul serio significa sacrificare una vita. Sono cresciuti i figli e io non me ne sono accorto… una vita di sacrifici. E di gelo: così si fa teatro.”9 It is clear that Eduardo is a special case in the Italian literary panorama because though his works are not autobiographical, they do present a kind of autobiography that is reinforced by the fact that Eduardo is also the actor playing the protagonist who is very close to the dramatist: “Cerco di far sì che le mie tre attività teatrali si aiutino a vicenda, senza prevalere l’una sull’altra e allora autore, attore, e regista collaborano strettamente, animati dalla medesima volontà di dare allo spettacolo il meglio di se stessi.”10 This desire to present oneself in the best possible light may also involve a process of selection, suppression, and reticence, as Francesca Fiorillo

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8 De Filippo, _I capolavori di Eduardo_, p. VII-VIII.
10 De Filippo, _I capolavori di Eduardo_, p. IX.

Eduardo’s plays are inseparable from the events of his life and much of the critical discussion of Eduardo’s work is in the numerous biographies that have appeared. One of the biggest hurdles faced by these biographers was the need to separate sentiment from objective critical analysis with a consequent more or less successful outcome. Each potential reader and writer, in fact, was influenced by their own particular memory of their encounter with the author or with one of his plays.

Theatre studies is a relatively recent discipline in Italian Universities, with the first such department being established in the University of Rome in 1954. From the beginning, however, Eduardo was a standard part of the curriculum, and a range of useful university-level introductions to his work have appeared. In 1980, Giovanni Antonucci, published the comprehensive introductory reader: *Eduardo De Filippo* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1980) for audiences first getting acquainted with the playwright. The book provides an interesting history of the literary criticism on Eduardo and reproduces some of the very first newspaper reviews he received, including those by Massimo Bontempelli and Eugenio Ferdinando Palmieri. The book traces the development of Eduardo’s theatre from the early twentieth century, through the post-war period, until the seventies, with the aim to show an Eduardo who defies classification. Another scholar, Andrea Bisicchia, published two years later *Invito alla lettura di Eduardo De Filippo* (Milan: Mursia, 1982), which presents a chronological summary of Eduardo’s life alongside significant contemporary cultural and historical events. The book analyzes the principal plays according to topics and includes a survey of the major literary criticism.

The first complete and highly successful biography was written by a scholar outside the Italian university system, Fiorenza Di Franco. *Eduardo da scugnizzo a senatore* (Bari: Laterza, 1983) is a chronological itinerary of Eduardo’s artistic career for a general audience. The work’s major contribution to Eduardo scholarship is that of supplying a detailed chronological list of the dates and locations of the performances of each play and an extensive inventory of literary criticism. Di Franco assays the influence
major events have had on Eduardo’s writing. She highlights the socio-political significance of some plays and illustrates how the protagonist’s reaction against real or perceived injustice is at the center of their plot.

This Hungarian-Italian “outsider”\textsuperscript{12} also wrote two other extensive and detailed works: \textit{Il teatro di Eduardo} (Bari: Laterza, 1975), which claims to be a complete guide to the plays (and deals with \textit{Gli esami}, pp. 216-226); and \textit{Le commedie di Eduardo} (Bari: Laterza, 1984), which provides plot-summaries and key themes of sixty comedies (\textit{Esami} is N. 58, pp. 254-262).

Another scholar who is, like Di Franco, an Italian working in an American environment, is Mario Mignone. His book \textit{Eduardo De Filippo} (Boston: Twayne, 1984) based on his 1974 thesis \textit{Il teatro di Eduardo De Filippo: critica sociale} (Rome: Trevi, 1974), is the first biography written in English. The book focuses on Eduardo’s major plays while weighing the impact that Naples, Italian popular theatre (in particular that of his father Eduardo Scarpetta), Luigi Pirandello, and neorealism have had on his work.

\textit{Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite} (Milan: Bompiani, 1985), written one year after Eduardo’s death, Isabella Quarantotti De Filippo, the playwright’s widow, presented a collection of unpublished works, unfinished texts and interesting reviews. Along with reflections by De Filippo about his work, there are poems, photos, playbills, copies of early contracts, and even recipes. Quarantotti’s work is often sentimental, consisting of disconnected thoughts and nostalgic memories. The most interesting parts of the book regard the troubled relationship with Eduardo’s brother Peppino. She shows how a mutual incomprehension brought about the artistic separation between the two; this break was particularly pertinent to my thesis because it facilitated Eduardo’s move away from farce toward more profound issues. This is recounted through Isabella’s interpretation and analysis of the documents presented. Many of his most famous maxims on theatre and recollections from childhood are collected here but Quarantotti herself was quick to admit that the real author of the book was Eduardo as she had merely limited herself to organizing notes and texts that he had written. With the help of Sergio Martin,

\textsuperscript{12} An example of this comes from the choice of the title itself: \textit{Eduardo da scugnizzo a senatore}. Eduardo and his family found fault with the unflattering description of Eduardo as a “scugnizzo” (Neapolitan dialect word to describe a street urchin). Though a struggling artist at the beginning, Eduardo was certainly not a “scugnizzo.”
she subsequently published *Eduardo De Filippo, Vita e opere, 1900-1984* (Milan: Mondadori, 1986), a book that offers commentary and reviews by Dario Fo, Salvatore Quasimodo and Federico Fellini. The reflections by Fellini on seeing Eduardo perform as a young man during the Fascist period and by Dario Fo on Eduardo’s ability to engage the audience in a minimalist manner provide particularly useful perspectives from important artistic contemporaries.

In 1981, Eduardo delivered a series of lectures on playwriting to students at Rome’s *Università La Sapienza*. The classes were exceptional for an Italian university, in being based on the practical exercises the students were given to work on at home and then discuss in the following class, rather than on the delivery of technical rules and precepts. In 1986, after the dramatist’s death, transcriptions of these classes were edited and published by Paola Quarenghi as *Lezioni di teatro all’Università di Roma* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986). The volume is valuable at two levels. It represents a moment of mature reflection by the playwright on his life’s work. The editor, who was a coordinator at the time of De Filippo’s university classes, lets the transcripts speak for themselves, merely noting in a brief preface how a natural selection occurred as many of the students abandoned the course disappointed by Eduardo’s stern methodology and by the discovery that he was not intending to reveal any quick recipes for writing successful plays. In fact, De Filippo was attempting not to disclose some secret technique but rather to discourage most students from a career that is more of a calling rather than an acquired skill. Since his lectures were published posthumously, Eduardo did not have an opportunity to revise any parts of his lectures: some particularly harsh comments and tough criticism of some of the students might well have been deleted, but the volume is all the more important for its spontaneity.

In *Lo spettatore col binocolo: Eduardo De Filippo dalla scena allo schermo* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1995) the same scholar, Paola Quarenghi, considers for the first time De Filippo’s contribution to cinema. The book explores Eduardo’s ambiguous relationship with this medium of communication. At times he seemed to view it as inferior to the theatre but Quarenghi documents statements from 1939 which clearly show his realization of the utilitarian potential of cinema as a tool with which to divulge theatre:
Penso, oggi che abbiamo, assieme alla stampa, mezzi assai più completi per la conservazione e la riproduzione dell’opera artistica, quale ad esempio il cinematografo, quanto potrebbe essere prezioso per gli attori che verranno fra cinquanta o cento anni, e gli studiosi in genere, di conoscere la verità del nostro tempo, i problemi dello spirito agitati dai nostri scrittori di teatro.13

Quarenghi’s research reveals that De Filippo was already nurturing the ambitious project of divulging his theatre to as vast an audience as possible and to have a transcript that could serve as a future legacy. The revelation of his intentions to preserve his work was more important when attempting to highlight the complexity of De Filippo than the actual success, or lack of it, that his work had in cinema. In fact, it was quite evident that De Filippo was too much of a theatre personality to ever become a real player in the Italian cinematic scenario. Certain weaknesses in a cinematic performance of a De Filippo play rapidly came to the fore, i.e. the disappearance of that quick rhythm that characterized his performance on stage and the possibility of improvisation (even when consisting of just a particular look). Furthermore, the important relationship that De Filippo intended to establish with his audience was also weakened through the medium of cinema. As Quarenghi herself concludes, “Quel che poi è impossibile preservare – Eduardo lo sa bene – è l’unicità del rapporto spettatore-attore, la libertà di ognuno di farsi da sé il proprio spettacolo che non sarà mai uguale a quello di nessun altro spettatore. Quel che è impossibile preservare è, in una parola, il teatro.”14

Journalist and scriptwriter Maurizio Giammusso is the author of another biography Vita di Eduardo (Milan: Mondadori, 1993; reprinted Rome: Elleu, 2004), that follows Eduardo’s personal and professional life from the early thirties to the seventies. Giammusso had extraordinary access to unpublished private papers in the possession of the family, from Eduardo’s childhood letters to his father, through to correspondence with the legends of twentieth century theatre, including Pirandello, Totò, Anna Magnani, Paolo Grassi, Laurence Olivier and Franco Zeffirelli. Giammusso attempts an intimate account of the life of a figure whose name evokes strong emotional responses from those who remember seeing him on stage. His work examines in particular the strained

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14 Quarenghi, Lo spettatore col binocolo, p. 218.
relationship between De Filippo and those in power. Giammusso shows how, notwithstanding the political pressure during Fascism against dialect theatre, Eduardo’s overwhelming popularity assured the Neapolitan playwright the freedom to write his plays in dialect and how for Eduardo acting and writing in dialect, though seemingly a handicap, ultimately revealed itself as one of his greatest strengths.

In *Eduardo drammaturgo (fra mondo del teatro e teatro del mondo)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1988; 2nd revised edition, 1995), Anna Barsotti provides a systematic analysis of Eduardo’s oeuvre. She considers the intricate bond between theatrical and the literary, between performance with its orality and gestuality and text, a rapport that is especially laborious and relevant in Eduardo. The focus here is on the interesting and revealing juxtaposition of Eduardo the author with Eduardo the actor. In describing some of his more notable characters such as Gennaro Iovine or Guglielmo Speranza, Barsotti underlines the *chiaro-scuro* element highlighting their ambiguity and establishing their complexity. Barsotti argues that literary criticism has been slow to acknowledge Eduardo as a profound author whose plays can stand on their own. The reason for this has been principally due to the difficulty of separating the author from the actor.

In 1995, Barsotti also published a complete edition of De Filippo’s plays for Einaudi in two volumes. The dramatist had already divided his work into two halves: the *Cantata dei giorni pari* (Cantata for Easy Times, collected works first published in 1956) and the *Cantata dei giorni dispari* (Cantata for Hard Times, collected works, which actually comprises the bulk and is further divided into three volumes, first published in 1951 (vol.1), in 1957 (vol. 2), and in 1961 (vol. 3)) but returned repeatedly to revise his selection. For Einaudi, Barsotti supplemented the collection with extensive notes on their performance, publication history, and on the texts themselves. The two parts are indispensable for anyone interested in understanding Eduardo’s plays and in obtaining a critical overview of the reception by the critics and the audience. Barsotti gives a brief summary of the plot, detailed descriptions of the characters, and presents the general themes of each play. Her incisive and analytical critique brings to the fore more clearly and forceably than any other work of literary criticism on De Filippo that unique Eduardian technique, especially present in *Gli esami non finiscono mai*, of monologues, pauses, and speech without using words. Barsotti shows that in Eduardo even the refusal
to speak or to act serves as an act in itself. Though at times Barsotti’s commentary appears pedantic, there is always meticulous attention to detail.

Maria Procino Santarelli’s *Eduardo dietro le quinte* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2003) avoids almost all personal information and intimate recollection in favor of an objective historical overview of the social and political background during De Filippo’s artistic career. The section on Fascism is especially enlightening as it permits us to see how De Filippo’s work process was influenced by the political restrictions put on theatre during that time. It was then interesting to see how the playwright used his art as a tool to both get around those restrictions and condemn them as well. Her analysis of the deteriorating situation of the *teatri stabili* in Italy and De Filippo’s ambitious, but hopeless, project to restore the Teatro San Ferdinando, helped me identify some of the probable causes for the playwright’s growing disillusionment. Santarelli’s work includes an extensive and updated bibliography that proved invaluable in gathering literary criticism that could strengthen my portrayal of the development of his thought process.

A special issue for his eightieth birthday (24 May 1984) was published by the newspaper *Il Mattino* with reflections by many of the actors, authors, and directors who had worked with him through the years such as Giorgio Strehler, Vittorio Gassman and Paolo Grassi. Since Eduardo’s death, however, scholarly analysis and criticism have developed alongside a continued nostalgic reverence for the great Neapolitan dramatist. Conferences held in March and October 2001, and in November 2004, as well as an unflagging enthusiasm for his work in the commercial theatre, bear witness to the importance of his work.15

My thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1, *Testing Times: Negotiating Authority in Pre- and Post-War Italy*, explores Eduardo’s troubled relationship with the authorities and the consequent effect his unheeded appeals had on his playwrighting. This chapter aims to show for the first time how the social and political background influenced Eduardo’s move from lighter writing to the exploration of more serious issues that

culminated in his production of *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. The chapter takes into account the impact that political censorship and government funding had on his theatre company and clearly illustrates the techniques De Filippo needed to use in order to circumvent the Fascist Regime and portray through his plays the surrounding bleak reality. The chapter aims to reveal a deeper, hidden layer in plays that have always been simply viewed as comic, such as *Questi fantasmi!*, with the purpose of strengthening my case of Eduardo as a thoughtful and intellectual playwright. I analyze different factors that exacerbated his growing disenchantment such as the ethical vacuum in the post-war period and the lack of financial support from the government both for his company (as a playwright who writes in Neapolitan dialect he is not eligible) and for the reconstruction of the Teatro San Ferdinando in Naples (unlike cinemas, theatres are not considered public good and are therefore ineligible for post-war reconstruction).

Chapter 2, *The Last Mask of the Commedia dell’Arte*, demonstrates how limited it has been to view Eduardo merely as an exceptional actor rather than take into consideration his exceptional playwright skills and his desire to pass on his own particular technique and style. In this chapter I show how his many attempts to do so support my view of the playwright’s depth. My aim here is to illustrate how De Filippo was able to contribute something new to theatre without refuting his past by drawing heavily from the *commedia dell’arte* tradition and successfully creating his own original, recognizable mask. In order to present the basic characteristics of his *maschera*, I describe how he achieved his look, how he used his voice and how he moved on stage. Along with the *commedia dell’arte*, the chapter assays the influence that his own father, Eduardo Scarpetta (the creator of Felice Sciosciammocca), possibly exercised on the invention of his theatrical persona, along with his childhood training on stage, and both the positive and negative impact of early literary criticism (such as that from Massimo Bontempelli, Renato Simoni, and Eric Bentley). For the first time, the creation of a new, modern *maschera* by Eduardo is discussed and with it the potential it has, in a play like *Gli esami non finiscono mai*, of revealing with magnetic looks and eloquent silences his opinion of the human condition. In fact, in *Gli esami*, the compendium of an artistic lifetime, Eduardo uses Guglielmo Speranza, his last variation of the mask he has created to interpret his pessimism and to communicate what is essentially incommunicable.
Chapter 3, *The Plays: the Development of Eduardo’s Philosophy*, offers a brief artistic itinerary in chronological order through those plays that I found to be fundamental to his evolution from writer of the play in which the Eduardian anti-hero is first introduced, *Sik-Sik, l’artefice magico*, to the 1973 manifesto of disillusionment, *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. His most popular plays such as *Natale in casa Cupiello, Filumena Marturano*, and *Questi fantasmi!* are considered alongside lesser known plays such as *La grande magia, Le voci di dentro*, and *Il contratto*. Particular attention is given to his neorealist work *Napoli milionaria!* because it represents the watershed moment in Eduardo’s career when he intentionally turned away from farce to focus his attention on more serious matters. The chapter also evaluates the major influence that Pirandello had on De Filippo’s exploration of deeper themes and the plays in which this is most evident: *Questi fantasmi!, La grande magia*, and *Le voci di dentro*. The reasons behind the playwright’s distancing from the optimism portrayed in *Napoli milionaria!* toward the growing disillusionment in plays such as *De Pretore Vincenzo* and *Il contratto* are seen as a consequence of his thorny rapport with the Catholic Church. And finally, at the end of his artistic journey, De Filippo’s existential query *Gli esami* is closely studied. The protagonist, Guglielmo Speranza, is revealed as an individual at odds with society, unable to communicate with his family and Eduardo’s true alter-ego.

Chapter 4, *A Study in Analogy: O’Neill, Miller, and Shakespeare*, discloses unexplored factors, such as the literary influence that the Americans Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller and the English playwright William Shakespeare, may have had on De Filippo. In an original study, I focus on their respective works: *Long Day’s Journey into Night, Death of a Salesman*, and *The Tempest*. I chose these three plays because of the strong effect I felt they exercised on Eduardo when he was writing *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. Shared themes such as the common man as hero, the impact of “family ghosts,” the grim portrayal of family ties, and the need for personal enlightenment are explored. The chapter also uncovers Eduardo’s personal reasons for choosing to translate Shakespeare’s *Tempest* into Neapolitan at the end of his life. By illustrating the many analogous factors linking these playwrights together my aim is to validate the thesis that De Filippo is indeed a more profound artist than he is often recognized as.
Chapter 5, *Eduardo’s Last Play: Manifesto of Despair or Legacy of Hope?* closely examines the text of *Gli esami non finiscono mai* with the conclusion that in spite of its heavily pessimistic undertone, Eduardo himself retains hope in future generations. This chapter addresses the author’s belief in the individual’s potential to overcome the hypocrisy of society. It demonstrates how it is *Gli esami* alone, his final play, to hold the key to understanding his logic. In a play that acts to some degree as a confessional work, Gugliemo/Eduardo comes to the bitter realization that life is a never-ending test. While the first two acts of the play focus on the increasing breakdown of communication in the family (the microcosm of society), the third act features Speranza as a motionless protagonist who has apparently renounced life. We soon see that the truth is much more intricate: not only is Speranza still capable of petrifying grimaces before abandoning himself to complete silence, he also has his own unique way of cheating death.

And finally, the *Conclusion and Introduction to the Translation*, present the preface and provide the first English translation of Eduardo’s final play *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. My translation, *Exams Never End*, is central to the entire thesis. In order for the reader to grasp the scope of Eduardo and to ultimately recognize the depth of the playwright it is in fact necessary to read this play. For this reason, it was imperative for me to offer an English version of the work that so far had never been translated. The main purpose of the translation was therefore to provide a fundamental tool in understanding the development of Eduardo’s thought process and to allow the reader access to a very different side of the playwright. It also permits a director the opportunity to stage Eduardo’s last play in English. The preface will address different issues such as the register, the period, the names of the characters, the songs. Translating the play was essential as it afforded me the opportunity to get inside the playwright’s head. In fact, when deciding on the translation of a particular term I had to force myself to think the way he might have. My aim was to remain true to the dramatist by delivering a work with the same tone and nuance that I instinctively felt he would have demanded be there.

By the time Eduardo De Filippo wrote *Gli esami non finiscono mai* he was unquestionably one of the most complex dramatists of the twentieth century. For anyone wishing in the future to gain insight into family and domestic life in this turbulent period of Italian history, there could not be a more complete or sensitive body of work than that
of De Filippo’s. He was born in 1900 from the union between the famous Neapolitan playwright Eduardo Scarpetta (whose career is discussed in Chapter 2), and Luisa De Filippo (the niece of Scarpetta’s legitimate wife). When he died in 1984, at the age of eighty-four, De Filippo left behind a vast repertoire that records the different moods and perspectives of the Italian people from the advent of fascism, through the Second World War, and into the difficult years of reconstruction, industrialization, and the Cold War. The attentive and sensitive reflection of the past lives of the older generation of Italians helps explain the strong emotional hold Eduardo’s work still exerts on them.

By translating his last work, *Gli esami non finiscono mai* (that the reader is advised to read first), and presenting a close analysis of the socio-political and cultural factors that influenced its writing, I aim to present a playwright who is more profound than the regional phenomenon he has often been dismissed as. And though he is still most appreciated for his vivid portrayals of Neapolitan everyday life, I have chosen to focus on *Gli esami* for the very reason that this play is seemingly devoid of them and it reveals an artist concerned with deeper issues. Eduardo, at the end of his life, is according to journalist Roberto De Monticelli, “un uomo che, rinunciando a fare l’artefice magico (dal cappello è volato via la colomba della giovinezza) dice duramente la sua sulla vita, sui tabù di questa società e persino sulla speranza del dopo.”

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Only in this last play does De Filippo finally feel confident enough to do without the “excess baggage” of the farcical distractions of the classical Neapolitan dialect theatre. Before writing *Gli esami*, any plays where Eduardo delved into deeper issues were misunderstood and even produced accusations that he was imitating Pirandello. This happened during a performance of the play *La grande magia* (1948), as reported by the critic Eric Bentley “When this story was first placed before an audience, in Rome, last February, everyone cried Pirandello! […] Whether Eduardo was influenced by Pirandello or was simply nourished from the same sources and interested in the same problems was

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not discussed. Worse still: the word ‘Pirandello,’ as such words will, prevented people from seeing things that would otherwise have been evident.”

While Eduardo readily admitted being influenced by the great Sicilian playwright, this study aims to reveal Eduardo De Filippo in a new light, independent from any other author. In order to do this, the reasons that brought the author of the 1945 version of *Napoli milionaria!* to remove its most famous and last line “ha da passà à nuttata,” from the 1972 version, and, even more significantly, write one year later *Gli esami non finiscono mai*, a manifesto of disillusionment, warranted inquiry. My thesis proposes to shed light on Eduardo’s shift in dialectic from one of hopeful optimism to one of apparent pessimism at the end of his artistic career.

Although the play *Napoli milionaria!* ends on a positive note, Eduardo is ruthless in confronting his audience with how the war has transformed them; and through the mouth of the protagonist, Gennaro Iovine, Eduardo voices not only the need for war to end, but also for social injustice to be resolved, for poverty, unemployment, and illegitimacy to be erased. The characters of his plays may be Neapolitan but the moral dilemmas and dramatic situations are universal. This fact greatly contributes to the relevance and widespread popularity of his work.

His brother, Peppino, who acted in many of his plays, explained the essence of Eduardo’s craft in these terms:

Quel nostro senso teatrale d’humour mai fino allora conosciuto sufficientemente sui palcoscenici italiani, quel parlare, cioè, con sorriso amaro di cose affatto liete, quel presentare con un velo di comicità ciò che in realtà è triste e penoso, deludente e doloroso […] fu il cardine intorno al quale si mosse il nostro successo.

And Eduardo seeks truth in the bitter part of laughter not in the comical aspect of everyday life. Eduardo’s contemporaries in the field of neorealism, such as De Sica, Visconti and Rossellini, also realized that tears and laughter were merely two sides of the same coin. Works such as *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) or *Umberto D* (1952) portray an Italy consumed by hunger, with its people trapped in poverty and humiliation divested of all strength and individuality. Such neorealist tendencies are also characteristic of De

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17 Bentley, “Eduardo De Filippo and the Neapolitan Theatre,” p. 112.
Filippo’s theatre. Just as the neorealist films had brought to life the tragedy of the ‘little man,’ without epic ambition, so Eduardo created his Domenico Soriano, Gennaro Jovine, and Luca Cupiello. He sculpts this central figure, the Neapolitan anti-hero, and surrounds him with other characters who portray the themes dear to himself: the precarious state of illegitimate children, the role of women, and the need for family unity. In his special, multi-faceted role of capocomico (author-director-actor), Eduardo brings to the fore the humanity or lack of it, the injustice and meaningfulness of Naples.

After Eduardo, the actor, concluded the first act of Napoli milionaria! in 1945, Eduardo, the author (though the two are never totally distinct), announced to the audience from the stage that the second act of the play would mark the turning point in his career as a playwright. While the first act was reminiscent of the Neapolitan humouristic theatre, in the second act he was consciously distancing himself from farce and comedy to begin his exploration of dark and weighty issues.

The sense of hope found in Napoli milionaria! is intentionally absent in his last work, Gli esami non finiscono mai, and whereas the protagonist of the first play, Gennaro Jovine, is able to inspire the other characters to better things, in Eduardo’s last work, written in 1973, there is an irreparable rift in communication.

In Napoli milionaria! we see a normal Neapolitan family facing extreme circumstances that ultimately force each member to undergo a cathartic metamorphosis. Gennaro is understanding and blames something which is outside of them: the war; it has made victims of them all. He goes as far as to admit that under identical circumstances he might have acted in the same way. There is mobility, enlightenment and the hope that things will change for the better. This positive energy is missing from Eduardo’s last play, Gli esami non finiscono mai. Eduardo no longer blames what we have become on the war or on external elements: it is the very nature of man that must now stand trial.

This last installment of Eduardo’s theatrical production is a modern tragedy that moves away not only from the early farces, but also from his neorealist works to face deeper issues. Whereas in Napoli milionaria! there is hope and redemption, here it becomes very clear that the only thing that is hopeful is the last name of the protagonist: Speranza.
Note on Text and Translation

*Gli esami non finiscono mai* was first performed on 21 December 1973 at the Teatro La Pergola in Florence. The text of the play was first published by Einaudi in 1973 in the series “Collezioni di teatro,” and subsequently included in the third volume of the 1979 edition of *Cantata dei giorni dispari*. My translation is based on this edition.

Throughout this thesis all citations are in Italian. The titles of De Filippo’s plays are referred to by their abbreviated titles after the first time they are mentioned. All page references of the plays also appear in parentheses directly after the citation in the main body of the text.
Chapter 1

Testing Times: Negotiating Authority in Pre- and Post-War Italy

“Sappiate che la vostra posizione
sarà da noi guardata al microscopio.”

Throughout his life De Filippo had a troubled relationship with the civil authorities on various matters which affected both the subject matter and ethos of his plays, and the prosperity of his theatre company. Like his character Speranza, he did, to a large extent, submit to the dictates first of the Fascist state, and then of the intrusions of the Ministero dello Spettacolo in the post-war republic. He never ceased to criticize the state and its abuses, even though he sometimes felt that his criticism was unheeded. Eduardo’s widow, Isabella, in a conversation with me, recalled his sense of helplessness and exasperation, as he realized that his protests against the abuse of power went unheard: “si sentiva sconfortato: ‘ma io che scrivo a fare se nessuno mi ascolta’.”

This first chapter will explore the environment in which De Filippo and his company operated, and the way they managed to interact with state scrutiny and control while maintaining autonomy and dignity. It will look at some of the mechanisms of control, including censorship and government funding, the various Ministries that controlled theatre, the Republic’s response to the challenge posed by cinema and television. Against these constraints, it will examine De Filippo’s response at various levels: as a playwright, as a screen writer, as a director and actor. According to Carlo Muscetta, “l’attore, il regista, il commediografo sono tre aspetti della personalità di Eduardo De Filippo che da tempo siamo ormai abituati a considerare indissolubili nella loro perfetta fusione.”

But for Eduardo, even after his role as playwright was finished and the play was committed to paper, there was still the fundamentally important

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2 Isabella De Filippo, telephone conversation, 5 December 2004.
dialectic process to be had with the audience: “La storia del mio lavoro termina con la parola fine, scritta in fondo all’ultima pagina del copione; poi ha inizio la storia del nostro lavoro, quello che facciamo insieme noi attori e voi pubblico, perché non voglio trascurare di dirvi che non solo quando recito, ma già da quando scrivo il pubblico io lo prevedo. Se in una commedia vi sono due, cinque, otto personaggi, il nono per me è il pubblico: il coro. È quello a cui do maggiore importanza perché è lui, in definitiva, a darmi le vere risposte ai miei interrogativi.”

And De Filippo always felt compelled to ask his audience tough questions about the fundamental issues: why are we here and what is the meaning of life. But with Gli esami, which is quite consciously his last play, Eduardo shows us the life and death of a man who has wasted his life subjecting himself to a barrage of useless questions based on empty social conventions. Ultimately, these man-made “exams that never end” turn out to be a self-imposed life sentence and the questions they have posed requiring a solution are the wrong questions. Speranza ironically finds death a liberating experience.

**Testing times**

During the 1930s in Italy, the Fascist regime encouraged people to check up on each other at every level, so that the Fascist mentality of spying became the norm. This allowed any person at any social status to feel some degree of power and to become dangerous. As the social historian Giordano Bruno Guerri writes:

Il sistema […] riusciva a dare a chiunque una, sia pur minuscola, porzione di potere e questo piaceva immensamente agli italiani facendo sentire un po’ tutti gerarchetti […] erano anche l’ossatura del Paese e lo sarebbero rimasti nel dopoguerra, rinnegando i trascorsi fascisti ma certo non abbandonandone la mentalità.

De Filippo’s theatre was born into this environment of suspicion and fear. State control was almost total and the authorities, allegedly acting in public interest, had the power to shut down theatrical performances deemed unfit. By 1930, all productions had to be first submitted for approval to the Ministero dell’Interno, which delegated absolute

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4 De Filippo, *I capolavori di Eduardo*, p. IX.
authority to the provincial *prefetto* or his deputies as set out in Article 1 of the law on Public Safety (1931). In the interest of maintaining public order the *prefetto*, or local chief of police, could terminate any theatrical or cinematographic performance. Furthermore, the approval from his office, necessary for the performance of any opera or drama in public, was contingent on satisfying a myriad of bureaucratic obligations. Plays could be banned if they threatened public order, morality or propriety: and even if they had received permission, they could be shut down “for local reasons.”

In 1931 an autonomous Ufficio Censura Teatrale headed by Leopoldo Zurlo, was created that was not only intrusive but also capricious. During his twelve year reign, from 1931 to 1943, Zurlo read over 18,000 plays, about five a day, and his decisions were largely all shaped by the need to please Mussolini. As he admitted years later, when deciding whether to censor or not a play, Zurlo’s main concern was if the content could in any way, however remote, offend the Fascist dictator:

Un altro giorno arriva una commedia, *Il dominatore* che sostiene la eccellenza della maturità sulla gioventù. Zurlo si domanda se Mussolini a 52 anni è giovane o maturo. Evidentemente prevede e teme ancora un tabù. Allora, nella sua relazione (Zurlo rendeva ragione solo e direttamente a Mussolini) va molto guardingo…. Venne il no. Dunque Mussolini è giovane, conclude il Censore, e tranquillo va.

In 1935, the Ufficio Censura Teatrale was succeeded by the Ispettorato del Teatro, founded and headed by Nicola De Pirro. This office took over complete control of the

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6 Art.1 – L’autorità di pubblica sicurezza veglia al mantenimento dell’ordine pubblico, alla sicurezza dei cittadini […]. Le attribuzioni dell’autorità provinciale di pubblica sicurezza sono esercitate dal prefetto e dal questore; quelle dell’autorità locale dal capo dell’ufficio di pubblica sicurezza del luogo o, in mancanza dal podestà […]. Art. 68 – Senza licenza del questore non si possono dare in luogo pubblico o aperto o esposto al pubblico rappresentazioni teatrali o cinematografiche […]. Art. 70 – Sono vietati gli spettacoli o trattenimenti pubblici che possono turbare l’ordine pubblico o che sono contrarie alla morale o al buon costume […]. Art. 73 – Non possono darsi o recitarsi in pubblico opere, drammi o ogni altra produzione teatrale che siano, dal Ministero dell’Interno, a cui devono essere comunicati per l’approvazione, ritenuti contrarie all’ordine pubblico, alla morale o ai buoni costumi […]. Art. 74 – La concessione della licenza prevista dall’art. 68, per quanto concerne le produzioni teatrali, è subordinata al deposito presso il questore di un esemplare della produzione che si intende rappresentare munito del provvedimento ministeriale di approvazione. Il prefetto può, per locali circostanze, vietare la rappresentazione di qualunque produzione teatrale, anche se abbia avuta l’approvazione del Ministero dell’Interno. L’autorità locale di pubblica sicurezza può sospendere la rappresentazione di qualunque produzione che, per locali circostanze, dia luogo a disordini.” Testo Unico delle leggi di Pubblica Sicurezza, approvato con R.d. 18 Giugno 1931, n. 773. Gaz. Uff. 26 giugno 1931, n. 146; cited in Maria Procino Santarelli, *Eduardo dietro le quinte* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2003) p. 58.

programs presented by the theatrical companies and each text had to be approved by the office before any hope of being staged; but more importantly it had the power to distribute or deny financial support from the State. As we shall see, Eduardo De Filippo succeeded in maintaining a working relationship with Pirro and was able to work around the restrictions imposed upon him.

The Fascist regime’s battle against dialect, a dominant concern of the ministry dealing with press affairs and propaganda, the MinCulPop, established and headed by Galeazzo Ciano in 1933, became an issue for theatre as well. The use of dialect and regionalism was now blamed for perpetuating the backward mentality of the past: the new Italy needed to present a united front starting from the language and, therefore, all efforts to eradicate dialect were enforced. Since plays could not be banned simply because they were in dialect, the alternative solutions of controlling theatre funding and of discouraging press coverage of plays that it did not support were employed. From 1935, theatrical companies, had to apply for funding to the Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Industriali dello Spettacolo. This powerful federation had established restrictive norms to limit the number of companies and the capocomici of the approved companies had to deposit an amount equal to that of three days pay of the entire company along with a detailed budget for the season outlining: the actors, the technicians, the salaries, and the program. The program had to favor Italian authors.  

In spite of official hostility towards dialect and the diffidence of theatre impresarios who had misgivings about their popularity with a Roman audience and feared that the Neapolitan company would offend the Fascist authorities, the De Filippo company achieved considerable success when it moved to Rome in 1930, and opened for the first time at the Teatro Valle. In a 1953 interview with journalist Raul Radice, Eduardo remembered his performance of Natale in casa Cupiello and recalled how the antagonism towards dialect companies in the 1930s caused many dialect actors to give up: “Se nel 1930 non mi avesse arriso il successo del Valle, anch’io probabilmente avrei rinunziato al dialetto. Sarei diventato un mediocre attore italiano.”

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Eduardo recalled that other companies were jealous of his huge success and protested to the ministry hoping to limit his theatrical season as much as possible so that they would have a chance to perform. As a result, the Ministry intervened, as Eduardo recollected in 1966:

E poi mi limitavano le stagioni a venti, a dieci, a quindici giorni, non mi davano più di due mesi di contratto a Roma perché si ribellavano le altre compagnie e andavano a ricorrere dal Direttore dello Spettacolo De Pirro. E De Pirro riceveva pure lettere di sollecitazione da parte di autori, che gli chiedevano perché sosteneva il teatro dialettale […] Quindi De Pirro stesso, mi chiamava e mi diceva “Abbi pazienza, per quest’anno fatti un giro di quaranta, cinquanta recite….” Sicché il teatro che più in quel momento il pubblico amava, praticamente glielo vietavano.\textsuperscript{10}

Notwithstanding the push against dialect, the Eduardo De Filippo Company was extremely profitable. Eduardo made himself eligible for government funding by staging plays in Italian and by Italian authors. He received a subsidy in the Forties (the significant sum of L. 20,000) for staging Ugo Betti’s \textit{Il diluvio} (1943).\textsuperscript{11}

By 1945, as the \textit{borderò} or balance sheet from one of their most successful plays, \textit{Napoli milionaria!}, shows (Figure 1), they were earning on average Lire 70,000 per show (at the time a car cost about Lire 60,000-70,000).\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Eduardo De Filippo, “Eduardo e Zeffirelli: un grido d’allarme per il teatro libero,” \textit{Sipario} 21, no. 247 (November 1966), p. 11.


\textsuperscript{12} AEDF. TDE , b. borderò’ 1930-1946, \textit{Napoli milionaria!} Rome, Salone Margherita, 13 May 1945.
Figure 1. Borderò for *Napoli milionaria!*, Naples, 13 May 1945. Naples, Archivio Eduardo De Filippo, Shelfmark 13545.
As the *borderò* makes clear, Eduardo De Filippo’s role is a complex one. As *capocomico* of his company, he is author, actor, director, producer, CEO, accountant and deal-broker. He does not have the luxury of choosing the moral high ground, because he has expenses that have to be met before any portion of the takings can go to the actors. Even when he was free from the petty control of the *prefetto*, he still had to maintain the support of the public. He also had to deal with the rapaciousness of theatre owners.

In Milan, April 1946, he confronted three of them from a position of strength. The owners of the three main theatres, the Odeon, the Teatro Nuovo, and the Olimpia, wanted to give him a percentage which he no longer found acceptable. In a radical move he changed theatre, moving to the Mediolanum, an old variety theatre that was willing to give him an unimaginable 70% of the box-office takings. In an interview, he recalled:

> A Milano c’era un trio di impresari teatrali (i “tre grandi” li chiamavano) i cui contratti con le compagnie non offrivano mai più del 50% degli incassi. Volli rompere questo anello, me ne andai al ‘Mediolanum’ che era un vecchio teatro di rivista e feci *Napoli milionaria!* al 70%. Dopo due giorni il teatro era zeppo e si vendevano i posti con una settimana di anticipo: fuori del teatro, c’erano le sette piante che si riempivano subito.\(^{13}\)

From 1945, the De Filippo company enjoyed almost continuous success and economic autonomy.

**Political censorship, government funding, and the art of adapting**

Censorship was a relatively simple means for Fascist authorities to disseminate their propaganda, since it was tied quite unsubtly to government funding. The national theatre companies were financed by a system of prizes and by on-going financial support, a new practice in a country where, since the seventeenth century, theatre had been financed by theatre owners and theatre companies. By controlling direct financial support and through a network of favoritism, the government was also able to control content. Eduardo chose to avoid direct confrontation (or glossed over the difficulties he had encountered).

More than fifty years later, in 1981, he explained to a class of students at Rome’s *Università La Sapienza* how, after an early satirical piece when Fascism was still relatively benign, he was forced to either repress or camouflage most of his work for the duration of the Regime.

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In the Rome lectures, De Filippo used Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* to show how those early “allusions and allegories” worked. Eduardo was intrigued by Shakespeare’s portrayal of the solitary figure of Shylock who has borne the brunt of time’s arrogant injustice and been a victim of a hypocritical society that condemns him for usury after having profited by it. In writing this play, in fact, Shakespeare craftily found the way to ultimately condemn society and not Shylock. According to Eduardo,

Shakespeare avrebbe usato una tattica: non potendo difendere apertamente l’ebreo, figura vincolata da un repertorio drammatico preesistente ed esponente di una razza storicamente avversata nell’Inghilterra Elisabetiana, egli lo avrebbe condannato sul piano della vicenda narrata, ma avrebbe poi finito per difenderlo con efficacia ben maggiore suscitando nei suoi confronti, con le sue arti di grande poeta e drammaturgo, un sentimento di pietà negli spettatori e nei lettori meno superficiali.

Since he could not defend Shylock openly, the English playwright, uses veiled dialogues in which we, the audience, can see what he is trying to do only after he has already done it. He is accusing Christians of being hypocrites. This is the way he gets around the censorship of his time. This is one of the extraordinary techniques used by Shakespeare that Eduardo attempted to emulate in his own work.

Eduardo wondered how Shakespeare, who had an even tougher time than Eduardo had had during Fascism, was able to cope,


15 De Filippo, *Lezioni*, p. XVI.
In another play, *Othello*, Eduardo notes how Shakespeare invented scenarios that were influenced by the prejudice of his time and that ultimately served the opposite objective of better delineating the injustice. Not without prejudice of his own, he points to *Othello*:

“Come per *Otello*: solamente nero doveva essere il geloso, non poteva essere bianco; altrimenti questa storia della gelosia in Inghilterra non l’avrebbero accettata, perchè gli inglesi non potevano essere gelosi, dovevano essere strafottenti nei confronti della donna.”¹⁷ The real point for Eduardo is that while on the one side Shakespeare denigrated Shylock, on the other he was able to find an ingenious way to save him as well. Eduardo’s own comedies work in a similar fashion: his characters are not entirely likeable, but he will fight for their rights within a society that is pitted against them, and make their redemption or at least resignation possible by means of bizarre, sometimes surreal, comic twists.

Not only did the Regime attempt to exercise control over what De Filippo put into his plays, but it also sought to exploit his success and his performances in order to enhance its own ends. It was not entirely successful. Eduardo did manage to avoid military service and got around an invitation for a contribution in gold by Melchiorre Melchiori, the secretary of the Federazione dei Sindacati Fascisti;¹⁸ he was forced, however, to enlist in the voluntary militia for national security, which, in 1936, was mandatory for all men between the ages of twenty one and fifty five. Furthermore, he could not avoid staging plays on the so-called *Sabato teatrale fascista*, when only Italian plays were to be performed but for this he was duly entitled to a state subsidy.

Despite the constant requirement to represent the successes of Fascism, De Filippo was able to find ways of representing the blackness of the current situation. In 1980 Federico Fellini recalled a revival of *Natale in casa Cupiello* (1931) that he had seen more than forty years earlier as a conscious counterpoint to the delirious charade of Fascist politics:

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prima volta i De Filippo che raccontavano di un’altra Italia, un’Italia abissalmente lontana da quella che stava immediatamente fuori dal teatro. […] La prima apparizione dei De Filippo nella mia vita divenne un contraltare, un rovesciamento della pagliacciata che infuriava tutto intorno.\[19\]

The bleak reality that we find in Eduardo’s later neorealist theatre was already evident in his earlier plays, to those not blinkered by Fascist ideology and already a source of humour.

Eduardo and his brother Peppino enjoyed huge success on stage presenting parodies of Fascist tunes or inserting between lines jokes about Mussolini. His nephew Luigi recalls: “si divertivano a parodiarle le canzonette in voga in quel tempo inserendovi dei versi che sfottevano Mussolini […]. Eduardo abitava allora a Roma in Via Aquileia […] la sua casa era ritrovo di molti antifascisti.”\[20\] Often, however, there were Fascists in uniform among the spectators. For this reason, at times the two brothers had to escape from the theatre to avoid being beaten up; at other times they had to abandon performances because of the bombings outside.

The De Filippos were considered subversive and the Fascists were keeping an eye on them as is clear from an official report submitted by Manlio Calindri in 1943:

Da molto tempo sorvegliavo i fratelli De Filippo, i quali erano ritenuti sovversivi e irriducibili antifascisti […]. Io posso ancora oggi confermare che i due fratelli De Filippo […] svolgono continuamente attività e propaganda antifascista.\[21\]

It was in this tense atmosphere, and to meet the requirement to do plays in Italian, that in 1944 at the Teatro Valle in Rome Eduardo revived Pirandello’s *Berretto a sonagli* (1917), playing the part of the protagonist Ciampa, the town “jester.” The play tells the story of a woman, Beatrice, who accuses her husband of having an affair with Ciampa’s wife. When she realizes the scandal that is about to erupt and the dishonour she will cause Ciampa, she thinks up a clever way out. Beatrice pretends that in a bout of insanity and jealousy she invented the adulterous scenario.


Titina De Filippo, Eduardo’s sister, described what happened as Eduardo delivered lines of Ciampa, with particular innuendo. According to Titina, the audience immediately grasped the significance of the character’s pent up anger and frustration at not being able to truly speak one’s mind and clapped frenetically as a reaction to its own fear and impotence against the Fascists. “Sono i bocconi amari, le ingiustizie, le infamie, le prepotenze, che ci tocca d’ingozzare che e’infrecidano lo stomaco! Il non poter sfogare, signora!”

Once again Eduardo exploited the potential ambiguities of Pirandello’s text, but it was a dangerous act to play and one night the De Filippis were warned that Fascists had come to see them perform with dubious intentions. The thugs saw the enthusiastic reactions of the public and made it clear that they were present to teach the De Filippis a lesson:

Dopo lo spettacolo i fascisti salirono in palcoscenico “per dare una lezione” a Eduardo e Peppino, i quali, però, appena calato il sipario, senza nemmeno struccarsi e cambiarsi d’abito, avevano lasciato il teatro da una porta secondaria […]. Il giorno dopo Eduardo e Peppino vennero a sapere che stava per essere spiccato un mandato di cattura nei loro confronti.  

The two brothers were forced to leave the theatre from a side entrance and keep a low profile until the arrival of the Allies the following year.

**Bottomless indignity: post-war theatre**

In order for his theatre to maintain favor both with the public and with the Fascist authorities in such troubled times, it was both an artistic and an economic necessity that the nature of his plays should change. But much of the subsequent disillusionment, so strongly illustrated in *Gli esami*, came from the realization after the war that despite the sacrifices and the compromises nothing much had changed. Just as De Filippo had found ways of adapting to the intrusions of the Fascist state, so the old Fascist systems of control found ways of continuing in post-war Italy. The new government of 1948 had a

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“Ministero dello Spettacolo” just like the Fascist ministry which had preceded it, and with the same person in charge. The new ministry provided public funding to theatre, and through that funding and network of patronage, it succeeded in stifling rather than fostering creativity, and in extending the Fascist systems of control to the new republic. Old conservative values could be enforced at the local government level by invoking the same public safety issues that had been exploited by the Regime: fire hazard and crowd control, public order and decency; these were some of the motives that could be used to shut down any performance not to the authorities’ liking.

In the years immediately following the war, one of the most important issues for authors and for all those involved in public entertainment was the freedom to think and speak with neither censorship nor self-imposed censorship and to invent a language to do it that was not contaminated by the rhetorical bombast of the past. Bureaucracy, however, hindered the optimistic dream shared by Eduardo and his contemporaries. What proved to be truly insidious was that the Fascist mentality was more difficult to eradicate than Fascism itself. The power to wield privileges, subsidies, and censorship had simply changed hands by moving from the Fascists to the Christian Democrat party.24

As an occupying force, the United States wanted to ensure that the communists had no role in post-war Italy and thus failed to purge Fascist sympathizers from the Christian Democrat party. Even the organs of “free speech,” the newspapers, publishing houses, and movie houses, remained, with rare exceptions, in the same hands that had owned them before and during the war.

Attempts at censorship continued too, although for different reasons. In 1950, a Neapolitan deputy to the national parliament, Mario Colasanto, protested not against the horrors of Naples but against De Filippo’s realistic portrayal of them in *Napoli milionaria*: “Un forestiero che volesse giudicare la metropolis del Mezzogiorno da questo film dovrebbe concludere che Napoli è solo un insieme di vicoli sporchi […]. Intesi protestare per il buon nome della mia città e per tentare di rompere l’infame catena dei clichès di miserie napoletane che girano pel mondo.”25

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The English theatre critic Eric Bentley, in a 1951 article in *The Kenyon Review*, defended the playwright against charges by the government of a too bleak portrayal of reality. For Bentley, it was simply the hypocritical remedy of Italians turning a blind eye to the “black moral spots” highlighted in Eduardo’s comedies. “Abroad, people know about the brutalities of fascism, far more indeed than the citizens of fascist countries. What they know less about is something evident in every institution and every social group where fascism has secured a foothold: the corruption, the petty knavery, the bottomless indignity, the dishonour. There is no politics in Eduardo but in play after play he has put his finger on the black moral spot.”

With the acute perception of the foreigner, Bentley had already commented in 1949, on the continuing influence of the Regime on the theatre in the new Republic:

> E poi c’è il fascismo […]. Continuerebbe inevitabilmente ad essere presente come influenza – dopo vent’anni di governo e di educazione fascista – anche se si fosse operata una epurazione radicale nel 1943 o dopo. […] A capo del teatro italiano odierno (almeno per la parte che interessa il governo) c’è il signor Nicola de Pirro, il quale era già a capo del teatro italiano sotto Mussolini. Direi che ciò che non va nel teatro italiano odierno è il suo puzzo di fascismo. […] È la speciale estetica dell’era fascista che perdura.

De Filippo had come to the conclusion that despite the sacrifices and compromises of those who opposed it, Fascism had not been replaced by anything better, and bitter disillusionment permeates his plays. Eric Bentley, recognized that De Filippo consistently deplored in his plays the ethical vacuum left after the alleged disappearance of Fascism. Finding an ideology to replace it was a difficult, and possibly undesirable challenge. Bentley noted this failure of Italian authors to find pure values and a new optimism: “The Fascist era was but the lowest point of a steep descent, and whether the long climb up again has really got under way since 1945 seems doubtful.” In De Filippo the disappointment was particularly acute, and he underscored it by announcing the end of optimism, the “giorni pari,” and the beginning of pessimism, the “giorni dispari.” From that point on, his work is marked by a wry nostalgia for what has been lost, by a mocking

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of the prevailing hypocrisy and by a lively disrespect for all forms of pretentiousness that will climax in *Gli esami non finiscono mai*.

**Teatri stabili and the crisis of live theatre**

Throughout his career, Eduardo De Filippo worked to improve the way in which Italian theatre is regulated. Notwithstanding the Regime’s almost complete control over theatre, De Filippo had felt empowered by his extreme popularity and daringly suggested a different way of organizing and funding serious theatre. In 1938, he had published the following proposal in *Il Giornale d’Italia*:

> Ora ecco il consiglio: raggruppate tutti i più validi elementi del teatro italiano; costituite poche, pochissime compagnie, ma proprio buone, in cui ciascuno sia veramente al suo posto; date loro una sicurezza di lavoro per tre o cinque anni; fate che possano studiare e affiatarsi con tranquillità di spirito; date ad ognuna di esse un direttore che meriti fiducia e venerazione; e lasciate a lui, che non dovrà recitare, che conosce già, e meglio andrà scoprendo le singole qualità dei suoi attori, la libera scelta del repertorio, che gli Autori potranno, così, dignitosamente offrire o concedere.  

When De Filippo proposed this radical suggestion that the director should not act on stage as a possible solution to the theatre crisis in 1938, his aim was to gather support for the gravely troubled traditional form of theatre company: the *compagnia di giro* or ‘touring company.’ In the end, it helped provide the cornerstone for the creation of the ‘teatri stabili’ or ‘resident companies’ which came into being in 1947, when publicly directed theatres, financed by the government, were introduced. The first to be established was the Piccolo Teatro in Milan under the exceptional direction of Giorgio Strehler, Paolo Grassi, and his wife Nina Vinchi. Among all the *stabili*, this theatre shines as an example of successful public intervention but the system was also misused and lent itself to rampant abuse.

Public funding did not bring financial independence. For the Teatro Piccolo and for the theatrical sector as a whole financial support for serious theatre (*teatro di prosa*) did not bring economic independence, since it was merely a small percentage of the fees received from radio subscriptions and from another percentage of the diritti erariali (tax

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on the box office earnings). Furthermore, as director Luchino Visconti noted in 1949, “le sovvenzioni elargite dallo Stato non arrivano mai al momento in cui servono ma, per una serie di complicazioni burocratiche e ministeriali giungono a destinazione spesso dopo un anno, e di questo io ho personale esperienza come capocomico.”

These bureaucratic organizations, a legacy of the Fascist era with the mere function of controlling one another, stifled creativity rather than fostering it. New authors were encouraged and monetary prizes were awarded to encourage the performance of new Italian plays. The commission that granted the money was required to take into account not only the intrinsic value of the work but also the importance of the theatre where the play was to be performed.

De Filippo, however, was unable to apply for such funding, and indeed his company never received government subsidies. But he was also philosophically opposed to such funding claiming rightly that such a system of patronage would merely foster financial paternalism and would destroy any attempt at true renovation.

In 1948, in accordance with legislative decree n. 62 Disposizioni a favore del teatro, or the so-called “Andreotti law,” a new funding system of subsidies was introduced to benefit musical performances (accorded two thirds of the monies) and of theatrical performances (one third). Repertoires and activities were closely scrutinized in order to determine eligibility. Funding was granted to those companies that performed in Italian with a current repertoire of at least one third of the plays by Italian authors; financial subsidies were also given to the teatri stabili that had to be found eligible by a commission.

Despite the apparent generosity of this decree, De Filippo remained opposed to the subsidies for fear that companies would spring out of nowhere to get hold of the state cash. And though it was certainly necessary for the State to help out the theatre, this method was perhaps not the most straightforward nor the most helpful. But the most controversial part of the new decree was the obligation to perform in Italian rather than dialect.

Eduardo’s brother, Peppino, found the matter absurd. After all by the rest of the world Eduardo was considered Italian, certainly not Chinese:


The De Filippo company, however, was one of the few companies not to suffer financially in the post-war years from the mass importation of American films. The authorities refused to take protective measures (though it remains debatable whether such a move would have been appropriate or effective) perhaps because the protection of Italian theatre was not considered a worthy cause. As Bentley noted, “forse ai funzionari governativi sta più a cuore il commercio turistico che l’arte del teatro. […] Ora bisogna concludere che il pubblico di teatro, in Italia più che non sia in altri paesi, è stato assorbito dal cinematografo.”

Cinema had become the dominant sector most sought after by political and economic interests and once protectionist laws were abolished, the market was literally flooded by American films; a sort of cultural colonialism which took over Italy. The situation of live theatre soon became even more troubled with the introduction, in 1954, of television, which quickly became a widespread vehicle of mass culture. The fear that it would completely take over the world in just a few years was a very real one as patterns of recreation changed, families preferred to stay home and watch it rather than spend their money at the theatre or the clubs.

The advent of television, the strong influence of American cinema and the lasting Fascist mentality all had a devastating effect on theatrical companies but the real enemy in economical terms was the hated bordèrò (from the French name bordereau), the balance sheet which had to be drawn up after every live performance, and on the basis of which the company paid substantial taxes and fees.

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33 Peppino De Filippo, “Lettere girate per competenza. Se il nuovo direttore dello spettacolo sollecitasse il pensiero dei “teatranti,” questi che cosa gli direbbero?.” Il dramma 24 (1948), n. 60 (1 May 1948), p. 43.
On the borderò from the represenation of Eduardo’s play Napoli milionaria! at the Salone Margherita in Rome on 13 May 1945 (Figure 1 ab ove), we can see that from the box-office takings, Lire 64,620, the following expenses were detracted: revenue tax (15%), copyright tax, general tax on the proceeds of the show, and stamp duty on this general tax. These constituted 25% of the takings. To these were to be added the cost of handbills and posters, newspaper advertisements, furniture and sets, scene shifters, stage hands, electricians, orchestra, lighting material, timber, generator, engineer. The total expenses came to Lire 25,324.80, or 40% of the box-office takings. The last deduction was a 3% tax to the Actors’ Union leaving net proceeds of Lire 38,117, or 59% of the box-office takings, but these are once again split: 68% goes to the Company and the other 32% to the theatre-owner.

It is clear why a compagnia da giro, such as Eduardo’s, was in need of some sort of protection. Only with the guarantee of long contracts could such a touring company have the time to perfect its repertoire in the way that the teatri stabili could. And it was important for Eduardo to have not only the freedom of choice of repertoire but also to not have directors imposed on him from outside the company. After all, it should be the public to have the last word and thus a natural selection would occur anyway. In other words, only free trade in the theatre could keep it alive and healthy and not state intervention based on selective criteria formulated outside the theatre in government halls by government officials who really had no expertise in this field.

Years later, in 1981, when summing up the deplorable situation of the theatre, Eduardo blamed the authorities who, through government intervention, had greatly diminished the role of the actor.

“Per come è congegnata la cosa oggi, tutti possono entrare a fare gli artisti, gli attori. Basta dirlo: ‘Io sono artista! Sono attore!’ Oppure: ‘Sono comico!’ ‘Sono tragico’. E tu ci devi credere per forza. Ci sono i quattrini dello stato, del contribuente…. Sono discorsi lunghi, tremendi. Io ho accennato qualcosa con L’arte della commedia, proprio per fermare nel tempo la storia dei nostri giorni, i giorni che riguardano il teatro.”36

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36 De Filippo, Lezioni, p. 76.
After the social and political turmoil of the war years, De Filippo felt finally free to give new depth to his plays and to turn definitively away from light comedy. Eduardo recalled:

“Finalmente avrei potuto cambiare il mio modo di scrivere; mentre durante il fascismo avevo dovuto nascondere le verità sociali sotto il grottesco e l’assurdo per non essere censurato, adesso potevo parlar chiaro e cimentarmi nella forma teatrale alla quale da sempre avevo aspirato… abbandonando quell’artificio scenico che è la netta divisione fra farsa e tragedia.”

In March 1945, with Naples occupied by the Allies, Eduardo marked the creation of his Compagnia Teatro Napoletano di Eduardo with a new comedy in an original style, his ground-breaking Napoli milionaria! Like the unconventional cinema that would appear in the years following the war, this play is a realistic representation of the destruction of families, of soldiers returning home from the war as broken men, and of the general devastation inflicted on the civilian population. Freed from all needs to praise the Regime, the play creates humour from squalor, but many Italians, and certainly the people in power (like the Neapolitan Senator Domenico Colasanto whose attacks on the film are discussed below), did not want to hear Eduardo/Gennaro addressing those who had grown rich on the blackmarket while Gennaro was a prisoner of war, and reminding them that the war was not over yet: “No! Vuie ve sbaglate… ’A guerra nun è fernuta… E nun è fernuto niente!”

De Filippo was perhaps the first Italian author to talk about the moral devastation caused by the war, as Italian critic Vito Pandolfi noted:

La guerra e i suoi sconvolgimenti lasciano profondamente turbato Eduardo – che è il primo autore italiano, e tra i pochi a darne direttamente conto. Ricordo la prima di Napoli milionaria! e l’impressione che destò il suo riferirsi senza equivoci ad una realtà ancora così scottante, soprattutto nel primo atto, forte di un’evidenza scenica senza pari, di una schiettezza senza ambagi.

And yet, in contrast to the later ironic pessimism of Gli esami, Napoli milionaria! ends on an optimistic note. Here Eduardo still maintained the positive view that the Neapolitans, come what may, could win in the end thanks to the creative powers of their imagination. In the Rome lectures, he reiterated this upbeat side to the play. “In Napoli milionaria! io non intendevo scrivere che i napoletani erano milionari tutti quanti. I milioni e milioni che avevano e che hanno i napoletani sono la loro fantasia. Napoli è sempre milionaria, sempre.”

One of the new creative outlets explored by Eduardo was the cinema. By the time the war ended in 1945, Italian film production was in shambles. The Germans had confiscated all the materials and converted Cinecittà into warehouses that were subsequently bombed by the Allies. Some studios even served as refugee camps and there were very few resources left. Primarily with American financial assistance, the film industry was reborn, and De Filippo and the neorealist film makers played an important role in the rebirth of Italy. Italian directors felt the need to portray a people desperate to redefine themselves after the dark years under Fascist rule. And neorealism in films, was influenced as much by necessity as by ideology. If there were no elaborate sets, then Eduardo would use the streets. If he could not come up with money for actors, he would use the common people.

According to scholar Mario Mignone it was up to the artist to take a civic and social stand:

The theatre, the novel, and the movies were the chief means by which contemporary society was placed under investigation. [...] De Filippo’s theatre of the immediate postwar period reflects such neorealist tendencies. [...] As a result of the war, De Filippo acquired a more universal sense of history; he began to view his vocation as a man of the theatre as even more humanly and socially committed, and he began to express his judgement on his time with greater authenticity. [...] Like many artists of the period, De Filippo was guided by a renewed commitment to human solidarity and justice.  

But often these dark stories that came right out of the landscapes, were better appreciated abroad than in Italy; the images in De Filippo’s neorealist film and in the works by Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti all touched a chord with Italians overseas. The films

42 Mario Mignone, Eduardo De Filippo (Boston: Twayne, 1984), pp. 68-69.
showed them what they had really left behind and the suffering their fellow citizens had gone through after the war. The strong attention to family ties in these stories was in large part due to the general feeling that in terrible times like these only flesh and blood could be trusted.

In *Napoli milionaria!*’s portrayal of squalor in Naples after the war, De Filippo intentionally moved in the opposite direction of fantasies, depicting on stage and screen what had never been seen before. The extraordinary novelty of De Filippo’s plays and subsequent films was that they were a product of their own time and they forever changed the expectations of what a play or film should be.

For the first time, an author like De Filippo felt that through the staging and filming of his plays he could affect the authorities and even bring about change. For this reason, neorealism for De Filippo was not merely a style, but rather a reaction to a dreadful time in Italian history.

De Filippo wanted to communicate to the rest of the world everything his country had been through. He dissolved the barrier between documentary and fiction, imploring the rest of the world to look closely at the Italian people and see their essential humanity.

That is why Eduardo does not just want to make *Napoli milionaria!*, he needs to. His move away from the early, seemingly lighthearted farces was born out of a spiritual necessity. The experience and suffering caused by the war inspired work that up until that moment had been conditioned by the melodramatic themes of the Neapolitan dialect theatre. Writer Gennaro Magliulo recalled the important role observation played in Eduardo’s realistic portrayals:

Il punto di partenza immediato dei De Filippo autori – attori è l’osservazione e alla ricostruzione della realtà che li circonda. Si è scritto come, a quell’epoca, Eduardo e Peppino restassero ore ed ore fermi in Piazza San Ferdinando seduti a un tavolo del famosissimo caffè “Gambrinus,” meta quotidiana dei vitelloni cittadini. Di costoro i due attori osservano il comportamento, le piccole manie, il modo di esprimersi, il vanitoso e quasi clownesco atteggiarsi. E, tornando a casa o in teatro, ripetono quei gesti, quegli atteggiamenti, come una lezione da mandare a memoria […] l’una e l’altra delle due versioni, quella smunta ed in apparenza bonaria di Eduardo, l’altra comica sino all’assurdo e alla follia di Peppino, corrispondono ad un atteggiamento nuovo nei confronti di un “motivo” che da secoli ispira il teatro di Napoli.43

Using the everyday misery of man as his background, Eduardo created believable characters; in order to realistically portray their words, gestures, and screams, he relied heavily on the language of the stage (for full discussion see Chapter 2) but was still a long way from the existential explorations to be found in his later works.

Eduardo like Pirandello, another playwright with a background in dialect, has a penchant for making the spectator laugh, perhaps the cleverest way of all to make one swallow the bitter pill of self-awareness. Especially in performance, Pirandello is extraordinarily witty, but for the most part detached. His characters are amusing caricatures, his dialogue is pared back to clearly articulated essentials. In Eduardo, on the other hand, this comic ability is heightened by his use of dialect. De Filippo often writes about the absurd in coherent terms by using common expressions, humorous situations and recognizable characters and the use of dialect creates an illusion of familiar intimacy with the audience. He injects his play with small anecdotes and almost trivial scenes from everyday life so that they are familiar to us.

Naples after the war: controversy and criticism
The optimism of Napoli milionaria! was short-lived and soon gave way to a progressive disillusionment as the city of Naples lost much of the wonderful and colorful contradictions that served as Eduardo’s inspiration. The stark reality was that the daily existence in the post-war years had become a constant struggle for survival. Houses were so damp and humid that entire families were forced together in bed for warmth. Stealing became a necessity and many women went with soldiers in what almost came to be known as institutionalized prostitution.

The terrible circumstances and the failure or disinterest to resolve the problem by the people in government greatly contributed to Eduardo’s sense of rancor. And notwithstanding the widespread corruption there was still a reluctance to acknowledge any wrongdoing and, as mentioned before, when Eduardo began the 1950 filming of Napoli milionaria! the most bitter attacks on the film were paradoxically by the

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Neapolitan Senator Domenico Colasanto who went so far as to protest to the presidente del consiglio for what he claimed was a defamatory and malicious portrayal of Naples:

In tutta la trama del film, dal giorno della liberazione, non agiscono donne che non si concedano agli americani […]. Gli uomini sono a loro volta ambientati, indifferenti o profittatori del ludibrio delle loro donne. Tutta l’azione si svolge unicamente nei peggiori vicoli di Napoli. Vicoli arredati per l’occasione, con panni sporchi e laceri e popolati in modo inconsueto, come ogni onesto può sempre constatare. In realtà i vicoli […] non sono affollati come quelli del film […] e non si è fatto neppure del verismo; ma dell’immaginario raggruppando e moltiplicando quanto meno di buono offre la nostra città.45

After this surreal attack on De Filippo’s film, there was a general uproar, summed up by Italian critic Lucio Ridenti, who considered these comments both ridiculous and ultimately embarrassing for the political figure in question:

Non s’è ancora spenta l’eco dell’infelice figura fatta dal signor onorevole che dichiarò la sua guerricciola personale alla scollatura di una signora in trattoria che un altro signor onorevole – tanto per battere il ferro finchè è caldo – dichiara guerra a sua volta a Eduardo De Filippo, da lui accusato di aver commesso atrocità contro la nobile città di Napoli nella commedia e nel film dal titolo Napoli milionaria! […] ha rivolto un’interpellanza o qualcosa di simile, al Presidente del Consiglio invitandolo a prendere provvedimenti contro l’opera incriminata e il suo autore colpevoli d’aver leso l’onorabilità napoletana. […] Sempre nel nostro piccolo che, davanti a un onorevole, diventa più piccolo ancora, ci permettiamo altresì di avanzare il dubbio che il deputato in questione non abbia capito un accidente di niente […] ci prendiamo la libertà di invitare il parlamentare in oggetto a non impicciarsi nelle cose di cui non si rende perfettamente conto.46

There was even more embarrassment to come for the unfortunate senator who had the outlandish idea of first criticizing De Filippo for an unrealistic portrayal of Naples and then asking the playwright to help the poor children of the city. Eduardo answered in a public letter: “Dunque l’onorevole sa che a Napoli esiste la miseria. […] E lui ebbe la cattiva idea di rispondermi che la lettera, in ciclostile, era stata diramata dalla sua segretaria; e lui non sapeva che l’avessero mandata anche a me.”47 In the comic tradition Eduardo holds a mirror to folly to expose it to ridicule so that others may learn the truth.

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The San Ferdinando Theatre: a misbegotten project

Besides filming *Napoli milionaria!* Eduardo dedicated himself through 1950 to further screenplay writing for the cinema, mainly to finance his most ambitious project to date: the renovation of the old San Ferdinando theatre. Journalists like Indro Montanelli remarked that in his attachment to the colossal task he was: “cocciuto e irriducibile come certi personaggi delle sue commedie,” while others like Vito Pandolfi claimed his dream to rebuild a theatre a “dolce follia.”

De Filippo hoped the State would help him and he renounced more remunerative activities in order to put most of his resources into the San Ferdinando. But once again the authorities failed him, as journalist Corrado Augias noted “il disinteresse del Comune di Napoli per il San Ferdinando è uno dei tanti aspetti dell’indolenza di quell’amministrazione. […] La disattenzione delle autorità centrali (Direzione generale del teatro presso il ministero dello Spettacolo) invece rientra in un panorama più ampio di mancati interventi.”

In 1951, Montanelli wrote about Eduardo’s zealous commitment, “Avesse elevato al suo posto un casamento per negozi e abitazioni, avrebbe guadagnato a occhi chiusi cento milioni. Invece ne spese di suo trecentocinquanta per rifare del San Ferdinando quel gioiello di lusso e di eleganza ch’era ai tempi dei Borboni.”

Regarding the lack of support De Filippo received from the political class, Montanelli caustically observed, “Nessuno gli dette un soldo. Quando si mise all’opera, egli ignorava perfino l’esistenza di una legge che vietava allo Stato qualunque contributo per la ricostruzione di ‘locali di divertimento,’ quali nel nostro ameno Paese sono considerati anche i teatri.”

In Eduardo’s mind, the project of the San Ferdinando was a starting point to create something positive, but what proved to be the ultimate blow, both personally and financially was the way the political forces left him to fend for himself, abandoning him to fight alone against insurmountable legalities. Pandolfi commented that most actors made lucrative investments in restaurants and bars while:

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Eduardo De Filippo ha invece compiuto un gesto che sembra assurdo tanto è generoso. Ammettiamo pure che si abbia voglia di costruire un teatro. La logica consiglia di farlo a Milano o a Roma, dove gli incassi sono ben diversi da Napoli. […] Una sfida contro tutto: le leggi economiche, le previsioni, le statistiche.

Seeing the reconstruction of the theatre as an important step not just for Naples but for all of Italy, De Filippo, asked for financial help from the State but he was astonished to discover that though cinemas were considered public good and therefore eligible for post-war reconstruction aid (60% of the expenses incurred by those rebuilding them), theatres were not. When the State turned his back on him he was forced to rebuild it on his own with loans from the bank and work in the cinema. Understandably bitter about this lack of support from both city and government, he appealed to the then Minister of Entertainment Giulio Andreotti:


Eduardo needed to move from the theatre to the cinema in order to earn money for his theatre because he was refused financial support from the governing authorities. This disappointing realization that he was alone exacerbated the pervading pessimism of the giorni dispari, and eventually led to the feelings of resignation, shared by Guglielmo Speranza in *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. This last play by Eduardo focuses on the inevitability of solitude and death; physical and mental states not relieved by the people who surround you and over whom you have no power to influence. And it’s just a question of time before Guglielmo falls into dark depression, “Per farmi piacere, me ne andrò al più presto all’altro mondo. Non intendo suicidarmi, non v’allarmate: non voglio lasciare questa macchia infamante in famiglia. L’uomo sa che deve morire e che non c’è niente da fare” (*Gli esami*, Atto II, p. 574).

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At the center of *Gli esami* there is the family depicted in a negative light, but there is also the surrounding hypocrisy of those who make us undergo continuous exams; a world in which falsehood reigns and silence is the only weapon left to use. This play is in reality a culmination of all the De Filippian themes minus that *speranza* that had characterized his former work.
Chapter 2
The Last Mask of the *Commedia dell’Arte*

“Allora tutti questi signori non sono degli invitati, ma membri di una commissione di controllo?”

More than twenty years after his death in 1984, the works of De Filippo are still being performed all over the world, not just because the problems they address are still relevant, but also thanks to the technical legacy Eduardo left behind, in the form of a well defined mask, for other actors to follow. In order to achieve the permanence foreshadowed by the title of his last comedy, *Gli esami non finiscono mai* (1973), Eduardo De Filippo needed to rebut those life-long critics who attributed his success to extraordinary acting rather than exceptional writing. Even the Marxist theatre historian Vito Pandolfi, was critical on this point: “Eduardo non sa decidere se sacrificare tutto all’attore o tutto all’autore, indebolisce così l’uno e l’altro, nella macchietta e nel bozzettismo: senza indagare e penetrare oltre i limiti abituali.”

De Filippo realized that if he wanted to ensure the transmission of not only the text but also the technique and style of acting, he needed to write into the script all those elements that he had acquired through a life on stage strengthened by his almost instinctive understanding of the audience. Eduardo, the author, succeeded in doing this by drawing from the *commedia dell’arte* heritage of Eduardo, the actor, and creating his own *maschera*.

The mask of Eduardo has not only become an important contribution to Italian theatre but also changed with the Neapolitan playwright’s artistic and philosophic development. This chapter will examine the principal human and artistic influences on the development of this *maschera*, such as the *commedia dell’arte* tradition, his father

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Eduardo Scarpetta (1853-1925), and the stages of Eduardo’s development as an actor, and attempt to define its essential elements.

Unlike Pirandello’s concept of mask as the psychological and social characteristics that people adopt by choice or necessity in order to survive, Eduardo’s use of masks was more defensive. For him, the mask could also become a disguise, something to hide behind; but the *personaggio* he plays on stage always maintains some of the same basic characteristics and the audience has a set of expectations about his character. Even today merely mentioning the name Eduardo immediately conjures up the image of the character De Filippo played on stage in his many plays. By the end of his life, according to journalist Roberto De Monticelli, Eduardo was widely recognizable: “secondo il momento mimetico-interpretativo, fissa il volto in una maschera dimessamente derisoria o umilmente crucciata, neanche dolorosa, se mai stupita.”

Figure 2. Eduardo applying his make-up. Reprinted from De Filippo, *Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite*, p. 178.

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Figure 3. Eduardo’s *maschera*. Reprinted from De Filippo, *Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite*, p. 160.
Figure 4. Eduardo during the last act of *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. Reprinted from De Filippo, *Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, page inedite*, p. 168.
He did not wear the traditional leather mask of the *commedia dell’arte,* but created his own *maschera* mainly through set facial expressions, make-up and custom-made (by himself) moustache and wig. First introduced with the character Sik-Sik, Eduardo’s *maschera* has a skeletal and bony face, with expressive eyes surrounded by a thousand wrinkles that often break into a sardonic *ghigno.* His voice is deep and, unless he is imitating some other character on stage (in which case he uses *falsetto*), his words are expressed in a sarcastic and almost resigned sounding tone. His demeanor on stage commands attention from his audience and from his fellow actors, he speaks in elegant Neapolitan dialect with sarcastic intonations (he interjects “heh, heh, heh,”) and his character almost always plays the underdog who is secretly the wise one.

The expatriate English art historian Harold Acton observed in 1962 that: “He wears a corrugated mask of careworn comedy pierced by smouldering heavy-lidded eyes […] it is the last mask surviving from the Commedia dell’Arte – that of Pulcinella grown older, sadder and wiser.”

Perhaps it is the black and white contrast of Pulcinella’s mask that brings to mind Eduardo as De Monticelli noted, “Eduardo assume nella sua arte il bianco e il nero della classica maschera napoletana; quel bianco che è emblema insieme di ingenuità, ignoranza e follia. […] il nero mascherale del volto in cui si coagulano astuzia, ambiguità, estro della beffa e della frode, tutto quanto è necessario, al sottoproletariato degli Zanni, per sopravivere.”

In a *Vogue* magazine article shortly before his death Eduardo explained the importance make-up had in the creation of his *maschera,* “il primo passo dell’affascinante e complessa simbologia teatrale che permette l’intesa magica tra lo spettatore e il tizio che sta in scena è appunto il trucco.” In the article, De Filippo reveals how all the facial props (moustaches and wigs) were made by him out of real hair and lasted for decades in perfect condition. According to Eduardo, it is an actor’s obligation to create a physical character, after having studied the part, without relying on a make-up artist the way actors need to do nowadays. It is the performer, in fact, who must breathe life into the character created by the author. De Filippo had even concocted an

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ingenious if daring solution for making his face/maschera look older when he was a young man,

A quell’epoca ero un perfezionista e poiché, come ho detto, già prima dei vent’anni facevo parti di vecchio e avevo bisogno di rughe, borse e pappagorge, avevo inventato un trucco di grande effetto, tant’è vero che a volte, quando uscivo dal camerino, dove mi chiudevo a chiave per truccarmi, neppure i miei amici più intimi mi riconoscevano! Come facevo, non l’ho mai detto a nessuno, anche perché, in verità, si tratta di un segreto un po’… sconcio! Ma insomma, ecco qua la “ricetta”: da alcuni preservativi tagliavo pezzi di varia grandezza, più piccoli per le borse sotto gli occhi, più grandi per quelle sotto le guance e per le pappagorge; passavo il pennello col mastice nei punti dove volevo applicare i pezzi di gomma, aspettavo un paio di minuti, li attaccavo e li lasciavo seccare, poi mi truccavo normalmente.7

In this way his maschera remained unchangeable from the age of twenty to that of eighty and he was able to achieve a certain agelessness. Nowhere is this trick more obvious than in Gli esami where the script calls for the protagonist to go from a young graduate to a dying old man. And even though he did not need to cover his face with the traditional leather mask of the commedia, he did, like Pirandello, remain constantly aware of the complexity of the relationship between the individual character and the mask he adopts in society.

It was behind this mask, that De Filippo was able to introduce the deeper, existential themes of Gli esami non finiscono mai. Eduardo’s appreciation for masks came from his recognition of the power of theatrical tradition, as he revealed in an interview, “la forza della tradizione non si può distruggere. […] In teatro non si’inventa niente, se parliamo di situazioni e di personaggi. Chi dice che inventa il teatro, dice una bugia: è un vanitoso o uno sbuffone.”8

De Filippo, however, understood that tradition alone was not enough, it is necessary to use one’s own personal creative sense and observational skills. And so he created a maschera for himself as an actor in the tradition of the commedia dell’arte, with a set of characteristics and verbal and physical gestures, that was immediately recognized by his audience. “Forse perché il “personaggio” eduardiano si ricollega direttamente alla maschera della Commedia dell’arte, saltando dunque l’impasse naturalistico e superando

7 De Filippo, Vogue, p. 29.
la dialettica novecentesca fra la “maschera” e il “volto”; si richiama alla Maschera come archetipo creaturale dell’uomo intero.”

Eduardo came from an unbroken theatrical tradition reaching back to the *commedia dell’arte* and readily admitted in an interview given one year before his death that, “Senza la commedia dell’arte non ci sarebbe stato il mio teatro.”

The fact that in 1956 an entire issue of *Sipario* was dedicated to him is indicative of his importance within the development of Italian theatre. The following reasons stated by the magazine’s editor, Valentino Bompiani, are even more significant:

La prima: Eduardo è un commediografo che conta moltissimo. La seconda: è un commediografo che appartiene al gran filone italiano, quello di Macchiavelli, di Ruzzante, di Goldoni. La terza: è un commediografo che lavora sulla nostra realtà, sui fatti nostri. L’ultima: è un attore nel quale ritroviamo quella Commedia dell’Arte che dello splendido filone italiano è un altra potente espressione.

*Commedia dell’arte* is the name generally given to a form of improvised comedy, performed by travelling players that emerged in Italy at the time of the Renaissance. It was popular throughout Western Europe, receiving its greatest success in France where it became known as *Comedie italienne*. It was also known in Italy as the *Commedia all’improviso* (because much of the work was improvised in performance) and *delle maschere* (because the actors wore masks that represented different characters). Pirandello emphasized the importance that the *commedia dell’arte* had in the history of Italian theatre, “per la straordinaria virtù dei suoi Comici erranti, così detti improvvisi, la Commedia dell’arte, […] ebbe fama universale e fu considerata fuori d’Italia per tutto quel tempo come il Teatro stesso italiano.”

On stage, the actors who played the *innamorati* did not wear masks while those who played the *zanni* (Arlecchino, Brighella, Colombina ect.) did, and according to Pirandello,

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Tanti movimenti, era questione ormai d’accordarli alla bell’ e meglio. Distinti con vesti e
linguaggio inconfondibili i diversi tipi – ed ecco, con lo Zanni, Pantalon de’ Bisognosi,
ecco il Capitano terribile, ecco Arlecchino e Brighella e il dottor Balanzon e la servetta e
l’amorosa e il cavalier galante – fare che tutti avessero la loro parte da rappresentare in un
imbroglio qualsiasi, salvando una certa logica di condotta, che gli ormai vuoti schemi
classici fornivano facilmente.\textsuperscript{13}

Pirandello described the artist from the \textit{commedia dell’arte} as “il tipo dell’uomo di teatro
ch’è tutt’insieme autore e attore e capocomico, col Ruzzante famosissimo […] e con gli
artigiani senesi dell’Accademia dei Rozzi.”\textsuperscript{14}

As actor, Eduardo understood the taste of his audience and, as author, he could
follow his own creative instincts and his plays have all the vitality and direct impact of
the \textit{commedia dell’arte} and share its main characteristics: fixed characters (the \textit{povero
diavolo} down on his luck); a self-made mask (created personally with make-up, hand-
made wigs and moustache); improvisation (the freedom to improvise on stage although
there was a written script); gags (farcical moments on stage that provided comic relief);
dialect (\textit{italiano dialettale} or \textit{napoletano italianizzato}); and the same social organization
of the troupe (Eduardo was \textit{capocomico-impresario} of his company).

The actions staged were based on set themes with the element of improvisation, at
the basis of the \textit{commedia dell’arte}, however, it is a common fallacy to think that the
actors completely invented their lines as they went along. “The nearest they ever got to
this is probably that they sometimes wrote their lines, the script being the fruit of a
collaboration between various members of the cast. […] Eduardo De Filippo began his
career as an actor doing this sort of writing.”\textsuperscript{15}

The outcome depended in large part on the ability of the different actors but some
degree of improvisation, always played a determinant role in distinguishing the Italian
method of acting from other theatrical methods. Pirandello observed: “Fu certo gloria del
Goldoni scomporre la fissità delle maschere dal loro riso ormai artefatto e ridare ai

\textsuperscript{13} Pirandello, “Introduzione,” p. 22.
\textsuperscript{14} Pirandello, “Introduzione,” p. 20.
This type of social organization of professional theatre continued to some extent into late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century theatre companies. Eduardo De Filippo worked in the modern equivalent of such a close-knit troupe with a good degree of typecasting. As author and capocomico, Eduardo had full artistic control over the theatrical product. He was not limited by agents and copyright; he could write, rewrite, and improvise, so that his plays are “commedie subito più teatrali perché non composte nella solitudine d’uno scrittoio di letterato ma già quasi davanti al caldo fiato del pubblico.”

Scarpetta’s heritage

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Neapolitans flocked to the theatre to see the extravagant actor and playwright, Antonio Petito (1822-1876), an expert in the art of improvisation and his successor Eduardo Scarpetta, who recited at the San Carlino Theatre. The two performers delighted their audiences with humorous acts that kept one eye on tradition and the other on the changing moods of the audience. The importance of Eduardo Scarpetta on the Italian theatre scene was even noted by the writer and philosopher, Benedetto Croce, who wrote in 1909, “La commedia pulcinellesca del San Carlino era finita con il Petito e il teatro stesso, che per oltre un secolo l’aveva ospitata, fu abbattuto nel riordinamento di Piazza Municipio. L’eredità di quella commedia venne raccolta dallo Scarpetta, che prese a ridurre, spesso con molta abilità e brio, le pochades francesi.” This adaptation of French pochades was very popular with the Neapolitan bourgeoisie who still felt very strongly the Franco-Borbonic influence.

Scarpetta also skillfully employed the canovacci art that dominated the Neapolitan stage but he soon realized that the traditional masks had run their course. Scarpetta soon distanced himself from the buffoonery of the classic Neapolitan pulcinellate by

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18 Antonio Petito was the most famous actor-author of his generation. With his mask of Pulcinella he often went beyond the commedia dell’arte to explore his contemporary society.
introducing a new character, Felice Sciosciammocca, for a new type of *canovaccio*. Sciosciammocca was a hybrid invention, half mask and half individual, that had the exaggerated elements of the old *maschere* of the *commedia dell’arte*, but not the physical mask,

[...] un bebè piccolino e rotondetto, con la frangettina del figlio di mammà per bene, l’abito attillato a scacchi ed il mezzo tubino lustro. Un tipo beffardo e furbo, edonista e donnaiuolo, interessato e taccagno, eppur così piacevole nei tratti, così simpaticone e faccia tosta.\(^{20}\)

This character was a Neapolitan type (superstitious, pessimistic, and cynical) who appeared in many of Scarpetta’s plays, including *O medico d’è pazze*, recently restaged in Italian by Carlo Giuffrè, and was a more socially relevant character to the audience.\(^{21}\) Though some critics accused him of neglecting Neapolitan tradition in favor of adapting French *pochades*, Scarpetta blended realism and fantasy by alternating the occasion for a good laugh with a desire for social justice. In contrast to early twentieth century authors such as Pirandello and Verga, who were largely interested in rural realism and the provincial bourgeoisie, Scarpetta turned to the urban poor and the dark alleyways of the *bassi* and the *quartieri*. In Scarpetta’s work, and in that of his son, Eduardo De Filippo, the urban poor and the illustration of the everyday plight to improve their lives became the reason for theatre.

“*Tre ppiccerille, sott’a numbrello*”

In 1904, at the age of four, Eduardo made his debut as a small Japanese boy in a parody of the American operetta *The Geisha*\(^ {22}\) written by his father Scarpetta. Eduardo began reciting with his father and often with his brother Peppino and sister Titina, the “tre ppiccerille,” as they were called in the 1945 poem by the same name,\(^ {23}\) who were also born from the union of Scarpetta with his wife’s young niece, Luisa De Filippo.

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\(^{22}\) *The Geisha*, libretto by Owen Hall, lyrics by Harry Greenbank, music by Sidney Jones (1896).
On stage Eduardo learned early on the techniques of stage timing and improvisation and through experience he perfected them. From tireless observation Eduardo also became a master at producing the caricatures that became the foundation of the De Filippian repertoire: the “povero diavolo,” the overbearing mother, the nosy neighbor, the parasitic relative and so on. Paradoxically, Eduardo was also able to write down what is quintessentially an oral tradition and, as Goldoni did, create a “scripted improvised comedy.” As he recalled years later, his skill at writing plays was something learned early; the natural result of hours spent under the strict scrutiny of Scarpetta copying plays written by others and rewriting parts at the last minute: “Ho fatto la scuola ricopiando commedie, portando a termine commedie brutte, commedie buone, o commedie false che non corrispondevano alle mie idee. Quindi sugli errori degli altri mi sono curato io.”

The principal reason the company needed a script at that time was so that the prompt could feed the actors the lines.

In 1977, his brother Peppino recalled the many improvised shows for the neighbors when their mother, Luisa, was at the theatre watching their father perform and they were left in the care of the “portinaia” Donna Filomena,

In 1914, at the age of fourteen, Eduardo left home to become an actor with the company of Enrico Altieri, an old comic actor at the Orfeo Theatre. In this company, the range of

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24 Eduardo De Filippo, Lezioni, p. 135.
25 This was a time when a company like theirs was expected to do up to five different plays a week and therefore needed a prompt to feed them almost every line on a bad night. They did not have the luxury of rehearsing for a month before opening night, and then doing a season of just one play.
26 Peppino De Filippo, Una famiglia difficile, pp. 52-53.
work was vast and disparate: farces, melodramas recited without music, and small historical dramas. Here Eduardo sharpened his sense of observation, his critical acumen, and his compassion for the exploited people. He portrayed with pathos the squalid reality of those who had lost the will to fight a situation they had grown accustomed to:

Abituato dalle condizioni sociali e storiche in cui si dibatte da secoli, il sottoproletariato partenopeo, poiché il gioco gli torna talvolta di vantaggio, accetta la sua condizione come l’unica possibile, la più conveniente. Tanto che per molti essa diventa naturale, congenita.  

Whether it was natural and congenital for the poor and oppressed to remain silent was highly debatable and Eduardo knew that their desires and aspirations were conditioned by solitude and desperation. During the First World War, Eduardo travelled all over the peninsula performing, singing, and dancing for a living. He dabbled in writing, exploring and examining the everyday suffering, gratuitous cruelty, and repressed desires in human nature.

By twenty, De Filippo was already so popular that even though he was conscripted for military service he received, quite exceptionally, permission to leave the barracks every night to perform in the theatre. He was also freed from the daily obligations of heavy marches and other duties so that he could write and stage shows for his fellow soldiers.

Through the pre-war and post-war years, Italian theatre enjoyed a golden moment, both because of the measure of human drama available and for the theatrical models that arrived from the rest of Europe: Ibsen and Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, and Synge. There was the excitement provided by the pre-war experiments of the Futurists and the various European avant-gardes, and then the post-war experiments of Pirandello, and also of the grotteschi. These years were years of social transformation, of individual crisis, of a longing to renovate both on the page and on the stage. There was a desire to experiment while holding on to tradition: the revolution of Pirandello, the magical realism of Bontempelli and the onslaught of the “grotesque” were all different facets of this new passion. And from situational dramas there was a move to more interior dramas.

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The heir of Felice Sciosciammocca

Though Eduardo could have relaxed in the post-war period and enjoyed the commercial successes of the Scarpetta repertoire, he had greater ambitions: to revitalize the Neapolitan theatre. As his brother, Peppino, recalled in 1977:

"Studiavamo il modo e la maniera di poter dare una svolta diversa al nostro teatro napoletano che a quei tempi, da circa mezzo secolo, allegramente veleggiava sul “barcone” scarpettiano, carico di testi teatrali divertenti, sì, ma derivanti da pochades e vaudevilles francesi che per la massima parte, trasportati in ambienti partenopei, risultavano frusti in una maniera enorme e avvilente e con Napoli non avevano nulla a che fare. Noi, invece, auspicavamo la “commedia napoletana”!"

The first step was to link the company to the growing popularity of cinema. In 1924, as a live performance before the screening of the film, Eduardo proposed a short review called 8 e 8, 16: Eduardo’s avanspettacolo was born. Expected to last only a month, the show proved so successful that it stayed on for more than a year, periodically updated by Eduardo with small scenes taken from current events.

The second step during the early thirties (1931), was to let the playwright and the businessman in Eduardo take over. In an audacious move, the three De Filippo siblings formed their own company, Compagnia del Teatro Umoristico “I De Filippo.” Even in these earliest reviews, we see the first examples of the character that will become identified with the playwright and actor, the maschera of Eduardo. He appears in Farmacia di turno (1920), in Requie a l’anema soja (1926), in Sik-Sik, l’artefice magico (1929), in Le Bische (1929) (the title was later changed to Quei figuri di trent’anni fa to get around Fascist censorship), in the hugely successful one-act version of Natale in casa Cupiello (1931) and in Gennareniello (1932).

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28 De Filippo, Una famiglia difficile, p. 225.
29 The same mix of familiar actor and constant change of script still animates satirical television reviews like Striscia La Notizia. Italians still rely on satire and comedy to cope with social inequities, but while in Britain and Australia satirical review has continued without interruption from the 1920s, there is little to be found in Italy because of institutional and ecclesiastical censorship. (For example, Dario Fo and Franca Rame, who were banished from the mainstream after their attempt to bring it into Canzonissima in 1962.)
30 Natale in casa Cupiello in one act makes its debut on 25 December 1931 at the Cinema-Teatro Kursaal in Naples. Eduardo’s newly formed company is called Teatro Umoristico I De Filippo and alongside Eduardo, Peppino and Titina, there were the following actors: Pietro Carloni (Titina’s husband), Agostino Salvetti, Dolores Palumbo, Tina Pica, Luigi De Martino, Alfredo Crispo, and Gennaro Pisano. The three-act version we have today was first published in 1943 in the magazine Il dramma (n. 397). All the above
The traits of this successor to Scarpetta’s Sciosciammocca are most readily identified in *Sik-Sik, l’artefice magico*. Sik-Sik, the magical conjurer forced to make others believe that his losses are in fact victories, realistically portrayed the oppressed social condition of a Neapolitan anti-hero and the power of illusion as a means of dealing with an intolerable reality.

In 1977 Peppino deemed Sik-Sik to be the real beginning of the De Filippo Company’s success:

Fu quello, in verità, l’inizio della vera fortuna per noi De Filippo. Fu in quella occasione che il nostro nome di attori, ben capaci di uscire dalle vecchie formule teatrali (in cui, per esempio, si tollerava bene che un attore, entrando in scena, potesse rispondere con un profondo inchino all’applauso di saluto che gli indirizzava il pubblico), cominciò a correre sicuro e veloce sulla bocca di tutti. Del successo enorme che ottenne quello spettacolo di rivista, la parte del leone spettò al Sik-Sik di Eduardo.\[^{31}\]

During this period Eduardo was producing play after play in a fruitful “bottega del teatro.” As author and *capocomico*, he had to keep in mind the different members of the company, needing to create *ad hoc* roles to satisfy the strong personalities and artistic abilities of his brother Peppino and sister Titina. Often the entire act was constructed around their roles or created out of a single line improvised at rehearsal. He was occasionally so pressed for time that he was forced to write in less than ideal conditions, even in his dressing room while in the background the speakers were playing the film:

[... ] si scrivono con la costante preoccupazione dello spettacolo che deve essere cambiato. Gli angusti camerini del Kursaal (che ha un palcoscenico di trenta metri quadrati ed una soffitta bassissima) ospitano quasi permanentemente i tre “capocomici.” Si prova di mattino prestissimo (più tardi comincerà la proiezione cinematografica e non sarà più possibile); si scrive con la colonna sonora del film che fa da sottofondo [...].\[^{32}\]

The success of the plays was due not only to the chemistry between the siblings, all three great actors in their own right, but also to Eduardo’s ability to blend the variety review genre with an original repertoire of plays. The texts of these plays often evolved from random ideas followed by lively discussion and hard work:

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\[^{31}\] De Filippo, *Una famiglia difficile*, pp. 238-239.

Eduardo showed exceptional mental elasticity and an innate ability to improvise and take up the improvisations of others until the finished product was committed to paper. In this frenzied creative process, some of the most famous leitmotiv exclamations in the De Filippo repertoire came to be. An anecdote told by Peppino shows this process at work. And so while rehearsing the single act *Natale in casa Cupiello*,

 [...] la battuta che pronuncia Nennillo, figlio di Lucariello, nelle prime scene del I atto di *Natale in casa Cupiello*: “‘nun me piace ’o presebbio’,” a me, che interpretavo la parte di Nennillo, mi venne spontanea, a soggetto, durante una delle repliche della commedia (allora in un atto, e cioè il secondo dei tre atti attuali) al cinema-teatro Kursaal di Napoli. La battuta divenne poi lo slogan fortunato della commedia, e, addirittura, mio fratello in seguito ne trasse la conclusione grottesca della commedia che oggi il testo presenta.\(^{34}\)

**Popular consensus and critical acclaim**

At first glance, Eduardo’s early plays may have seemed mere farces enriched by brilliant acting but there was a substantial difference with his predecessors. It soon became evident that he was not interested in proposing just ‘more of the same.’ *Natale in casa Cupiello* marks a further turning point in Eduardo’s career.

In June 1931, Eduardo obtained from the impresarios of the Kursaal Theatre (the modern day Filangieri cinema) the permission to present a short one-act play as a curtain

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33 De Filippo, *Una famiglia difficile*, pp. 265-266.
34 De Filippo, *Una famiglia difficile*, pp. 265-266.
raiser before the major feature or as an *intermezzo*. According to their contract, a new play had to be presented every Monday. This became a highly anticipated event.

The first important play written under Eduardo’s own name (he had previously used the pseudonyms Kokasse and Tricot first, and Molise and Bertucci later), was *Natale in casa Cupiello* performed on Christmas Day, 1931. Here the role of the Eduardo *maschera* is presented as that of someone who is basically ignored and belittled by his family and by others only to be understood and appreciated on his deathbed. Scarpetta had been, to a certain extent, an accomplice of the society he was representing, instead De Filippo was more ruthless in denouncing the gradual loss of moral values around him. In Magliulo’s words,

I De Filippo (e particolarmente Eduardo che è l’anima di quella formazione) anche se nell’affrontare l’analisi della società italiana adottano lo strumento comico infallibile elaborato dai loro predecessori, cambiano punto di vista; l’indice moralistico è quindi nel sottofondo del repertorio Defilippiano.

The audience was ready, however for this kind of serious comedy. *Natale* was so successful that it required the extension of the contract at the Cinema-Teatro Kursaal in via Filangeri from one week to many months and it raised Eduardo’s status considerably. The De Filippo were now hailed by all of Naples. They were praised unanimously by Neapolitan theatre critics and spectators from all walks of life flocked to see their plays. The first important accolade they received was from the writer Massimo Bontempelli, in 1932:

Se nella mia vita di italiano, come ho detto, ho il vizio di Napoli, nella mia vita napoletana ho il vizio della compagnia De Filippo: e mentre altrove sto anni interi senza mettere piedi in un teatro, mai una volta sono rimasto anche due giorni a Napoli senza andarmi a risentire le commedie e i comici di quella compagnia: perfezione di gusto, arte, naturalizza e festoso abbandono. Mi domando perché i De Filippo non risalgono mai le vie d’Italia, allegri ambasciatori del più felice e beneaugurante spirito di Napoli.

Bontempelli need not have worried that the De Filippo talent was being relegated to Naples because soon after the actors were performing throughout the peninsula. Their

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35 Magliulo, *Eduardo De Filippo*, p. 28.
move north in the following years was also due to the fact that they had developed a product, a commodity that was marketable: it was the right size and shape for the entrepreneurs of the theatres of the urban centers of the north. While the use of dialect in his one-act plays performed in the south was extensive, its use was more moderate in the full-length plays staged up north. And, in 1934, Renato Simoni, the most powerful critic of the time, hailed the company as:

Attori vividi e freschi i De Filippo. […] Ma poi è anche da notare quel modo particolare dell’arte napoletana che procede più che per effusioni e per amplificazioni, per tocchi sobri, pensati, quella misura e rarità e lievità del gesto, che più che una rappresentazione dei sentimenti, è un abbozzo di essi, una allusione ad essi. E a queste qualità, dirò così, storiche ed etniche si deve aggiungere, in Eduardo, una nervosità tutta personale, qualche cosa che mette anche nella comicità, una umanità e una realtà scarnite ed amare.\(^{37}\)

A favorable review by Simoni was essential for the success of a play, but according to Eduardo’s sister Titina, Eduardo found Simoni’s early admonition to never break up the trio unacceptable; it suggested that their strength depended on their unity and not on their single talents. Even when he was surrounded by adulation for his acting, there were people who denied his achievements as a writer and as a social commentator. Years later De Filippo bitterly commented in *Sipario* that this was especially the case in Italy, “se io non avessi avuto la possibilità di interpretare le mie commedie, il pubblico italiano non le conoscerrebbe.”\(^{38}\) In reality the situation soon changed as the popularity of his work spread beyond Italy’s borders,

[…] hanno sempre detto che i teatri erano pieni perché le commedie le recitavo io. Per un certo periodo mi avevano pure convinto, perché io sono un poco vulnerabile, di questa affermazione; e calcolavo le mie commedie un fatto personale che poteva reggere solamente con la mia interpretazione. Ma tredici-quattordici anni fa, quando sono cominciate le traduzioni all’estero allora io mi sono ribellato e mi sono amareggiato molto contro costoro che sbandieravano questo fatto.\(^{39}\)

The journalist, Eugenio Ferdinando Palmieri, also addressed the thorny view that Eduardo’s plays could not stand alone but relied completely on his acting skills:


\(^{38}\) Eduardo De Filippo, “Un grido d’allarme per il teatro libero,” *Sipario* 247 (November 1966), p. 11.

\(^{39}\) Eduardo De Filippo, “Un grido d’allarme per il teatro libero,” p. 10.
Se il successo degli attori De Filippo è incontrastato, sugli autori De Filippo le polemiche sono frequenti [...] ma non è una “quantità di scenette avvivate dalla singolarissima arte comica” degli interpreti; ma, come il repertorio di Viviani, letteratura. 40

Rather than refute this claim that many regarded his work as series of *canovacci* rather than real literature, Eduardo responded by embracing the *commedia dell’arte* style and then trying to improve on it. And in a special edition of *Il Mattino* celebrating his eightieth birthday, Giorgio Strehler recognized De Filippo as, “grande autore di teatro nazional-popolare, radicato nella lingua e nel costume di una parte del nostro mondo, che diventa – proprio perchè parte ben individuata e ben definita – patrimonio universale.” 41

**Beyond the *commedia dell’arte***

For Eduardo De Filippo, improvisation on stage was like an apprenticeship in an ever-changing theatre workshop, which earned him the well-deserved title: “heir of the *commedia dell’arte*.” The English critic, Eric Bentley, in 1951, wrote that his early skits were similar to: “Chaplin shorts [...] They would represent incidents in the life of the little man, the *povero diavolo*.” 42 As Bentley observed (before Dario Fo’s theatrical career was under way), “Here is an actor more likely – for demonstrable historical and geographic reasons – to be heir of *commedia dell’arte* than any other important performer now living and that his style is distinctly different from anything one expected. It is a realistic style.” 43

In her memoirs, Titina recalled how all three liked to enhance the dialogue on stage during the actual performances; the improvised material was later added on to the written copy of the play. Occasionally they would laugh at their own improvised gags causing the audience to laugh even harder. The improvisation caused the length and content to differ so that from night to night the show would vary,

Una commedia durava così, a volte, un tempo molto superiore a quello della sera precedente, tanto che il pubblico tornava più volte per rivedere lo stesso spettacolo, sicuro

Ironically just as De Filippo became more successful he felt the need to break away from the rigid limits that the *commedia dell’arte* tradition imposed on him and create a theatrical culture he deemed missing from the Neapolitan scene. And in 1945, when his brother Peppino decided to leave the company, Eduardo felt actually freed from needing to ‘invent’ the comical roles he had been creating for his brother and could now focus on the darker side of reality. Growing commitment to deeper issues compelled Eduardo to completely abandon the monologues written for the variety and review format and to concentrate his efforts on a more socially engaged theatre.

The new company, formed in 1945 and called Il teatro di Eduardo con Titina De Filippo, consisted of Eduardo, his sister Titina, her husband Pietro Carloni, Dolores Palumbo, Tina Pica, Vittoria Crispo, Clara Crispo, Ester Carloni, Giuseppe Rotondo. Eduardo was owner, writer, director, producer and leading actor. It opened with *Napoli milionaria!* on 25 March 1945 when Naples was already under American occupation but the Repubblica di Salò was still resisting in the north. A new and extraordinary chapter in Eduardo’s career began, as he later reminisced about in a 1959 interview with journalist Enzo Biagi:

È nella mia città che ho provato la più profonda emozione della mia vita. Fu alla prima di *Napoli milionaria!* Quasi tutti i teatri erano requisiti. C’era il fronte fermo verso Firenze. C’era la fame, e tanta gente disperata. Ottenni il San Carlo per una sera [...]. Recitavo e sentivo attorno a me un silenzio assoluto, terribile. Quando dissi l’ultima battuta: ‘Deve passare la notte’, e scese il pesante velario, ci fu un silenzio ancora, per otto, dieci secondi, poi scoppiò un applauso furioso […] tutti piangevano e anch’io piangevo, e piangeva Raffaele Viviani che era corso ad abbracciarmi. Avevo detto il dolore di tutti.46

*Napoli milionaria!* confirmed Eduardo’s status as one of the most important post-war Italian dramatists silencing those who had maintained he was simply a very talented

44 Carloni, *Titina De Filippo*, p. 60.
45 In 1945, Peppino formed his own company, *Compagnia Peppino De Filippo* and staged the play *Non sei mai stato così bello* by Nelli and Mangini.
actor. In this play, he used succinct language and minimal facial expressions to further establish his *maschera*.

**Bitter humour**

If comedy is simplistically and superficially perceived as funny and tragedy as sad, Eduardo finds a way to integrate the two. Through laughter he arouses pity in an attempt to provoke a catharsis of emotions. Tragic characters, traditionally noble and heroic, in De Filippo are far from great. One of his anti-heroes, discussed in Chapter 4, for instance, Guglielmo Speranza, has experienced a fall from grace but his exit from the scene (death) comes after he has an insight and accepts his fate as necessary. The audience does not feel only pity for his character but also compassion.

For Eduardo, humour is “la parte amara della risata” born from the “delusione dell’uomo che per natura è ottimista,” and a necessary point of departure for his existential quest into the nature of man. It is through the wittiness of the actor on stage (unlike that of his American counterparts Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neill or that of William Shakespeare as we will see in Chapter 4), and in particular, the Neapolitan brand of humour (sarcasm, imitation and parody) that one can grasp the message of the author. This is why Eduardo’s plays rarely end in tears but provide true understanding between separate episodes of laughter. There is no real comedy in Eduardo. At the end, he is always portraying a biting reality. Laughter, though a necessary ingredient for his type of playwriting, is merely the means of exposing a bitter truth; but frequently it is mistaken for simple entertainment. As he explains in his poem “A g gente”:

'A g gente ca me vede mmiezz’ ’a via
me guarda nfaccia e ride. Ride e passa.
Le vene a mmente na cummedia mia,
se ricorda ch’è comica, e se spassa.

Ridete pè ciente’anne! Sulamente,
v’ o vvoglio dì pè scrupolo ’e cuscienza:
io scrivo ’e fatte comiche d’ ’a g gente…
E a ridere, truvate cunvenienza?
…Nun credo.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{48}\) De Filippo, *Le poesie*, p. 91.
The work presented itself under a comical guise but there was always an underlying truth of sadness and drama. While the American authors Eugene O’Neil and Arthur Miller were acknowledged as dramatists, as was Shakespeare in his time, De Filippo was initially taken for a comedian but the joy and humour was sardonic. His use of humour was a means to get to the basic sadness of life; there was no real humour in his plays and when he was amusing, it was often in a grim and sarcastic way.

**La maschera di Eduardo**

Eduardo transformed the traditional mask into something more personalized and re-wrote the Neapolitan tradition by making it more universal and refusing to be limited by the rigid structures of the past. He invented a new mask that could recount the human tragedy of our century: the crisis of the family, the breakdown of society, and the indifference of the authorities. His is a modern mask with magnetic expressions and powerful silences that has already become part of our twentieth century scenic history.

Many techniques he introduced were reminiscent of the *commedia dell’arte*, such as the art of improvisation and the physical transformations used, the “finto morto” in *Napoli milionaria!* or the three beards used by Gugliemo Speranza, “reca nella mano sinistra tre barbe finte: nera, grigia e bianca. Queste tre barbette posticce saranno di quelle che i comici guitti di un tempo, per render velocissime le loro trasformazioni, usavano fermare sui loro volti mediante cordoncini elastici e resistenti fili color rosa confetto” (*Gli esami*, Prologo, p. 523). Guglielmo Speranza is the last character to wear the mask of Eduardo, an autobiographical anti-hero who communicates notwithstanding silence, immobility, and ultimately, death. Unlike *Napoli milionaria!* here there is no optimistic line to break the silence. When I discussed the play with Eduardo’s son Luca, he concurred: for Eduardo, the refusal to speak indicates the refusal to live and silence always precedes death.⁴⁹

In a grotesque ending, Guglielmo moves around like a marionette at his own funeral dressed up for the occasion by his terrible relatives to look like a clownish parody of a man (with red rouge on his cheeks, his hair slicked back, and dressed in black tie).

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⁴⁹ Luca De Filippo, conversation with author (Rome: 9 December 2004).
For the audience, but not for the other characters on stage who perceive him as being dead, Guglielmo plays the “finto morto,” a part straight out of the *commedia dell’arte*; a real act in the face of a fictitious funeral.

Scoffing at the hypocritical and malicious eulogy recited by his antagonist Furio La Spina, Guglielmo is granted the unusual pleasure of hearing it with his own ears; in many ways this was a premonition of what really happened at his own funeral. Eduardo’s originality lay in his being an actor who communicated mainly with facial expressions and understated actions, a far cry from the stereotypical *sceneggiata napoletana*. He had the ability to speak using more than words to convey meaning. And Eduardo himself remembered how once, after a performance of *Filumena Marturano* in Paris, he was able to communicate to a non-Italian audience,

In order to be enlightened, it is necessary for the audience to be actively drawn into what is happening on stage and to strongly identify with the characters. And Eduardo was always very much in tune with the tastes of his public and he knew that they were interested in seeing performed on stage issues close to their heart and that they wanted to recognize themselves in the portrayals. Filippo explained in his Rome lectures how a playwright needs to observe above all his surroundings in order to represent what is real on stage: “Dobbiamo guardarci attorno. Quello che è necessario per voi è vivere di osservazione, stare a sentire i dialoghi nei negozi, sull’autobus, avere sempre l’orecchio al teatro.” Only then was it possible for him to become what Dario Fo described in a

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tribute for De Filippo’s death, “con lui se ne va uno dei più grandi personaggi del teatro italiano; ma se penso a Eduardo teatrante io vedo come un grandissimo, meraviglioso artigiano: uno che conosceva tutte le chiavi del fare teatro, uno che scriveva per l’attore.”

When discussing the art of acting, Eduardo proposed a simple test to see if an actor had true potential: “Prova a entrare in scena e a interessare il pubblico al personaggio che devi interpretare, senza parlare. Se dopo un minuto dalla sala parte una voce e ti chiede: ‘Mbè?’ paga la penale al capocomico e cambia mestiere.”

De Filippo explained in an article in Sipario what had really influenced his own choice in deciding to become an actor,

Ho fatto l’attore perché la mia famiglia era una famiglia di attori. La recitazione che vedeva sui palcoscenici di allora non mi piaceva, la trovavo esagerata, finta. Con la presunzione dei bambini ho pensato che avrei fatto molto meglio io, e che lì stavano sbagliando tutto. Per tutta la vita ho sempre voluto fare meglio degli altri, essere più vero, osservare più attentamente la realtà, raccontare meglio di tutti la vita.

For Eduardo, his theatre was emblematic of his philosophy of life but he never felt the need to leave anything written on his acting techniques because he believed that theatre, like life was continuously evolving. And to those who insisted on using techniques by Brecht and Stanislawskij he warned that if the two artists were still alive they would certainly have already abandoned their methods in favor of something new. He always let reality and an instinctive sense of theatre guide him:

Io posso dire dal rumore, dal parlottio che sento in sala prima del segnale del buio, prima di mandare su il sipario, posso dire l’incasso. Dalle prime risate o dal primo mormorio di approvazione o disapprovazione capisco la qualità del pubblico, capisco come devo recitare quella sera, quale dev’essere la tattica da usare nei confronti di quel pubblico.

In the issue of Il Mattino celebrating De Filippo’s eightieth birthday, Giorgio Strehler thanked the Neapolitan actor for having helped sharpen his own acting skills and for

53 Eduardo De Filippo, Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite, p. 159.
55 De Filippo, Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite, p. 148.
56 De Filippo, Lezioni, p. 134.
teaching him, “la ricerca della parsimonia nella teatralità, del minimo dei mezzi per esprimere il più possibile dell’uomo, dei suoi rapporti, dei suoi sentimenti e delle sue contraddizioni.”

The very first reaction De Filippo hoped to receive from an audience was always one of surprise. The mask of Eduardo maintained rigid certain aspects of his face while slowly, almost imperceptibly, his expressions changed, only after the attention of the spectators was already guaranteed. The real novelty was that De Filippo had the ability of gaining that attentiveness without barely opening his mouth. Acton claimed:

Eduardo is a poet as well as an actor and playwright, [...] who but Eduardo can so mesmerize an audience with half a word, a pregnant pause, a light gesture, and the immobility of those features which express anguish and defeat more often than joy and success? A master of self-control, he is the antithesis of the conventional stage Neapolitan.

When Dario Fo, another master of commedia dell’arte techniques, explained how an actor could condition the audience’s perception of a character he used Eduardo’s extraordinary scenic presence in Sabato, domenica e lunedì (1959), as an example,

Quando se ne stava laggiù in fondo alla scena a seguire in silenzio, con il solo sguardo, gli altri attori che si agitavano in casa. Bastava, quella sua presenza nell’ombra a catalizzare l’attenzione del pubblico. E quando veniva avanti in proscenio, parlando sommesso e accompagnandosi con due o tre gesti appena accennati, sentivi fermarsi il respiro di tutta la platea. Non c’era mai niente di descrittivo nel suo gestire e nella sua voce, niente di naturalistico [...].

The ability to rise above language becomes even more visible in those plays by Eduardo where the character refuses to speak and needs to communicate without words (for example, the last act of Gli esami non finiscono mai). It is exclusively up to the actor to influence the reactions of the public to his character and he can do so with or without the construction of an ad hoc mask, as intended by the commedia dell’arte tradition. While many mistakenly believe the commedia dell’arte to be pure improvisation it is actually based on very strict pre-established roles and scenarios with improvisation in a secondary

57 Strehler, Il Mattino, 24 May 1980.
59 Dario Fo, Manuale minimo dell’attore, p. 251.
role. In this same way, Eduardo sometimes gave the mistaken impression that his acting was totally improvised at the very moment he recited but this was often just the sensation he wanted to convey. This technique had the dual purpose of having the acting seem improvised and of keeping the audience on its toes. “Il pubblico, smaliziato com’è, se tu strilli la battuta comica, non ride. Te lo fa apposta! […] Se invece lo cogli di sorpresa è diverso. […] Ti fermi […] e poi dici la battuta che ti viene lì per lì. Ma devono credere che sia stata inventata lì per lì. È questo il difficile.”

Eduardo succeeded in transcending the *commedia dell’arte* by creating his own mask; as dramatist and actor-protagonist he could reduce his words to a minimum just because the audience knew what to expect from his *maschera*. By speaking directly to his audience through gestures and words, his visual mask coincided with his verbal mask and often supplied us with the key to understanding the entire performance. Guglielmo’s facial expressions were still communicating to the spectator long after they had stopped interacting with the other characters on stage.

There was a thriller like quality in his performances/plays that is fundamental as he explained to his students in 1981 at Rome’s *Università La Sapienza*. A powerful play, whether farce, comedy or tragedy, must keep up the suspense until the very end. “I personaggi devono, quando dialogano, devono parlare senza che il pubblico capisca ancora dove essi vogliono andare a parare, a che cosa mirano; perché sennò si annoia. La suspense di cui parlano i gialli è necessaria anche nelle commedie. Io mi sono sempre comportato così.”

In *Gli esami*, it is only in the third act that by living vicariously through the protagonist’s realization of his ‘false’ friends and hypocritical relatives that we, the audience, understand what the play is really about. The main character assumes the role of spokesman of a decadent situation, one where there is an ethical void made up only of existential uncertainty and moral confusion. In *Gli esami*, the compendium of an artistic lifetime, he uses Guglielmo Speranza, his last variation on the mask he has created for himself, as a way of dealing with his growing pessimism due to the realization of the

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60 De Filippo, *Lezioni*, p. 56.
futility of his struggles and to the impossibility to communicate what is essentially incommunicable. As critic Anna Barsotti observed:

Nel silenzio solipsistico, finale e fine a se stesso, del protagonista (previene e letteralizza la morte) ci par quasi di riconoscere quella riduzione dell’antilinguaggio al suo grado zero, che denota l’irrigidimento mentale dei grandi vecchi di Beckett o di certe coppe senili di Ionesco che hanno come unico interlocutore un coro di sedie; anche la pantomima sarcastica di Guglielmo Speranza appare distruttiva e autodistruttiva […] il personaggio eduardiano si ricollega direttamente alla Maschera della commedia dell’arte, saltando dunque l’impasse naturalistico e superando la dialettica novecentesca fra la maschera e il volto; si richiama alla Maschera come archetipo creaturale dell’uomo intero.62

**Heart of Darkness**

Through the *maschera* he created, Eduardo was able to explore the dark recesses of the human mind and venture into the unknown. But Eduardo does not allow his alter ego, Guglielmo Speranza, to speak at the very end, choosing an intentional refuge into silence to symbolize that he too has looked into the nature of man and cannot bring himself to speak about it. *Gli esami* is Eduardo’s manifesto of despair; in this last play he represents for the first time the realization of that unspeakable horror at the heart of the human tragedy: man’s helplessness in the face of the inevitability of death.

Though the plot was already formulated in the 1950s63 Eduardo did not feel his public was ready to relinquish the beliefs held dearly during the war and acknowledge the true situation faced by post-war Italy: the breakdown of the family, the complacency of the authorities, and the hypocrisy of society. And with the inevitability of death and no hope in the afterlife, the consequent horror of the human condition. And since the audience was not yet ready, Eduardo performed an act of self-censorship and waited another twenty years to commit *Gli esami* to paper and present us in 1973 with Guglielmo Speranza, the apotheosis of Eduardo’s mask.

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62 Anna Barsotti, “*La drammaturgia*,” pp. 56-58.
Chapter 3
The Plays: the Development of Eduardo’s Philosophy

“In ricordati che nei cieli ci sarà un altro tribunale che ti dovrà giudicare.”

In the previous chapter, I examined the changes in the organization of Eduardo De Filippo’s theatre company, his growing autonomy as an actor, and his creation of the maschera that he then played throughout his life. My focus was therefore on process and form while here I am more concerned with content and his fundamental understanding of the human condition and the way it changes over time.

This chapter will show how Eduardo De Filippo assimilates and exploits the major paradigm shifts of the twentieth century. It will do this by presenting a brief artistic itinerary in chronological order of the plays that are most fundamental to our understanding of the stages of De Filippo’s artistic and philosophic development. The best way to appreciate the complexity of Eduardo De Filippo, in fact, is through an analysis of those plays that represent significant steps in his transformation from writer of light farces to the pessimist playwright who wrote in 1973, *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. Since Eduardo’s entire life was dedicated to the stage, his plays cannot be treated as entities separate from their author; for De Filippo the theatre alone offered him the chance to craft a character and a personality that would express his social and political concerns. As he commented in 1977, “teatro significa vivere sul serio quello che gli altri nella vita recitano male.” I have divided his work into five groups in order to discuss the introduction of the Neapolitan anti-hero, neorealism, the influence of Pirandello, Eduardo’s growing interest in social issues, and finally his existential pessimism.

The plays written by Eduardo, the dramatist, provide us with the key to comprehending Eduardo, the man, because the stage was where he constructed his

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identity: “la mia vera casa è il palcoscenico, là so esattamente come muovermi, cosa fare: nella vita, sono uno sfollato.”3 At times it almost seems as though the only real life Eduardo knew was the fleeting reality of the stage but he was a refugee from life who preferred the definable parameters of the stage. De Filippo paid careful attention to the publications of his plays to ensure that the ephemeral performance was in some way captured for posterity. He knew the importance of the written word and how it would establish his reputation as playwright and not only as an actor.4 It is important to understand that in De Filippo the text cannot be seen as representing the actual performance. Like Dario Fo and Franca Rame, Eduardo as author, director, actor, and capocomico, was free to improvise in every performance and was in no way bound to a single authorial version. Pirandello, in contrast, insisted on his text being performed; Samuel Beckett’s estate still sends agents to ensure that modern productions conform to the writer’s wishes, and withdraw permission to perform if they do not.

Eduardo’s thought process can change as easily as plot and scenery and costume change. It is the plays, therefore, that can supply us with the tools to figuring out this quintessential “uomo di teatro.”5 Each of the plays considered in this chapter help bring us closer to grasping the mental disposition Eduardo needed at the end of his life to write what can be considered his testament: Gli esami.

The Neapolitan anti-hero
In the one-act plays, written from the late twenties onwards, and performed as curtain raisers of variety in the cinema, De Filippo first introduced his maschera of the anti-hero. As we saw in Chapter 2, Eduardo’s maschera is a humble individual, out of step with the society around him, who nevertheless captures our sympathy as he outwits his enemies, those who do not share his illusions.

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3 Eduardo De Filippo, Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite, p. 148.
5 Luca De Filippo, conversation with the author, 9 November 2004.
In 1929, at the Teatro Nuovo of Naples, in the one-act play *Sik-Sik, l’artefice magico*, within the variety show *Rivista Molinari*, Eduardo introduced the character Sik-Sik, Eduardo’s first alter ego and anti-hero, who marked both the beginning and, as we shall see, the end of De Filippo’s real success. Sik-Sik is the magical conjurer down on his luck, conceived “in un vagone di terza classe su un cartoccio di pane, formaggio e pere,” on a train trip from Naples to Rome. In Neapolitan, the name means “secco secco” and was the nickname given to Eduardo by the man at the box office of the Teatro Nuovo, but it also suggests an exotic element as it sounds like an Indian name.

For Sik-Sik, magic is not only an illusion but a means of supporting himself and his pregnant wife. But Sik-Sik’s tricks are only possible if his secret ally is sitting among the spectators. When this assistant does not show up at the theatre, Sik-Sik is forced to recruit another man at the very last minute with all the risks this entails. The many comic moments on stage, such as a dove being replaced by a chicken, quickly become grotesque when Sik-Sik’s wife is closed into a box with a real lock, rather than a fake one, and the play ends with him using a hammer to save her, even as he mediates between the newly hired assistant and the old one who has shown up late.

In the play *Sik-Sik*, the conflict between individual and society comes to the fore through drama and wit. *Sik-Sik* does not represent a total break with the old “curtain-raisers.” In representing the performance of a magician it is self-consciously making a play out of the old variety entertainment it replaced: the illusions work at multiple levels. Seeing Eduardo interpret the part of Sik-Sik seemed revolutionary and new to his sister Titina, who recalled,

Erano le prime volte che sentivo recitare Eduardo. Mi sembrava così diversa, così fresca quella sua comicità. Mi accorgevo che, a volte, ridendo provavo stranamente pena per quel viso scavato, pallido, per l’espressione di quegli occhi nei quali sembrava brillasse una lacrima. E dicevo fra me: ma Eduardo fa sul serio? Si. L’attore faceva proprio sul serio.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) De Filippo, *Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite*, p. 15.
\(^9\) Carloni, *Titina De Filippo*, p. 38.
Already in *Sik-Sik* we see a serious subject treated with laughter by Eduardo:

Sono le undici del mattino e stiamo provando *Sik-Sik*. [...] In questo momento abbiamo smesso di recitare perché stiamo ridendo fino alle lacrime insieme a tutti gli altri estranei che assistono, [...] tecnici, qualche maschera, qualche impiegato. [...] La comicità della situazione, quella dei lazzi di Eduardo e di Peppino, è così forte da smuovere, irresistibile, l’ilarità in noi stessi attori.¹⁰

In a bittersweet game of illusion and fact, Sik-Sik is a believer of dreams who is actually one of Eduardo’s most optimistic figures within the human tragedy scenario and it is telling that Eduardo chose to conclude his acting career as Sik-Sik in a performance for his eightieth birthday at the Teatro Manzoni in Milan (24 May 1980).

*Natale in casa Cupiello* (1931 and 1934)¹¹

Thanks to the financial success of the one-act play *Sik-Sik*, the De Filippis were in a position, in 1931, to create their own company which they called Teatro Umoristico I De Filippo. It made its theatrical debut on Christmas Day 1931 at the Cinema-Teatro Kursaal, after the main film feature, with the one-act play *Natale in casa Cupiello* which would later become the second act of the three-act play we know today. Like *Sik-Sik*, it is closely linked to the topical review format, but it was immediately recognized as transcending that single Christmas Day occasion.

*Natale in casa Cupiello* recounts the days immediately preceding and following the Christmas of a poor Neapolitan family. The protagonist, Luca Cupiello, is a man who lives outside reality, in a dark world of dreams, a perennial child who regards the world as one big toy. Luca’s inability to communicate with his family and his consequent feelings of alienation make him the prototype of numerous anti-heroes, out of step with real life, who culminate in a Guglielmo from *Gli esami*, warning his indifferent sons, “Ragazzi, io non posso continuare a parlare da solo come un pazzo” (*Gli esami*, Atto II, p. 571). In this play, farcical moments (such as the water stream in Luca’s nativity scene that accidentally overflows and wets his pants) give way to pathetic realism as Luca seeks the approval of his family for his nativity scene. Luca is the dreamer who still believes in...

¹⁰ Carloni, *Titina De Filippo*, p. 38.
the nativity scene and in the conjugal happiness of his daughter. The play ends with Luca clinging to the unrealizable possibility that the family will be close and united on Christmas Day.

Critic Renzo Tian credited the success of the play to a magical quality that transcends the ‘Neapolitan condition’ and holds a universal appeal:

_Natale in casa Cupiello è una delle prime grandi commedie di Eduardo. […] Rivedendola oggi […] ci tocca in modo quasi magico. […] Poche volte come nel Natale, la ricerca di Eduardo sa far coincidere la carica delle emozioni e la sottile truccatura comica della fantasia. Nel Natale ci sono già tutti i lampi e le fughe in avanti di un visionario che si lascia alle spalle le realtà. Forse per questo, e forse perché l’abbiamo rivista in una edizione nella quale Eduardo mostra di aver sublimato nello stesso tempo interpretazione e regia, ci sembra che questa commedia non sia più necessariamente legata alla sua condizione di “napoletana.”_12

When De Filippo extended the play in 1934 with the touchingly sad third act (resulting in the play we have today), the audience was shocked because it was as yet unused to hearing such dramatic content in a work of De Filippo. Eduardo’s sister Titina recalled “il pubblico accettò la nuova versione di _Natale in casa Cupiello_ in un primo momento con difficoltà, poi con grande entusiasmo, benché scioccato da quella specie di doccia scozzese che gli veniva propinata dopo due atti estremamente comici.”13

By moving from being a support act for the main cinematic event or from being one of three separate performing acts to being the whole program, Eduardo De Filippo shifted consciously from escapism to engagement, and required his audience to come with him. He engaged the public by forcing it to identify with Luca Cupiello and share his pathos. Then, he made the audience aware of the worsening political situation (the slow, inexorable advent of fascism) and of how he too, like Luca (and most Italians at the time), was turning a blind eye to all that was happening outside.

The audience was accustomed to the old witty dialogues and the humorous scenarios and was not always willing to acknowledge the subtle social messages right beneath the surface that De Filippo presented to them. Just as the Italian spectators were solely concerned with being entertained and to a large extent ignoring the spread of

13 Carloni, _Titina De Filippo_, p. 46.
fascism, so Luca Cupiello played the part of the old child who looks at the world without really seeing it. This way of using humour to show the audience what was uncomfortably painful and sad, ultimately ensured Eduardo’s success in Neapolitan and Italian theatre. It was a new type of wit, one that forced the spectator to watch with a bittersweet smile the portrayal of their own bleak reality and this, according to Eduardo’s brother Peppino, was the real secret of their success, “Quel successo che poi in breve valse ad imporci, con grande prestigio artistico, in tutto l’ambiente teatrale italiano.”

The veil of humour, moreover, allowed Eduardo to continue to write and perform throughout the Fascist period, as it let him to conceal his attacks on the Regime. Like Sik-Sik, the De Filippo Company are masters of illusion.

**Neorealism**

Eduardo’s neorealist dramas of the post-war period best capture that moment in time when history and theatre meet. It was imperative that Italy find itself and regain the dignity lost under Mussolini. Even without belonging to the group of northern intellectuals (Vittorini, Pavese, Ginsburg, Calvino) or to the new directors of Cinecittà (Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti, De Santis) De Filippo felt a profound necessity to depict the desperate times in Italy after the war and his post-war plays explore similar terrain, presenting the struggles of the working class, in unheroic situations characterized by physical and moral squalor. Of significance, his new enthusiasm for the authenticity of dialect.

In the neorealist dramas examined in this section, Eduardo moves away from the exotic and magical to write about ordinary people who become protagonists under extraordinary circumstances. Eduardo’s *maschera* underlies the characters of Gennaro Iovine and Domenico Soriano, but in this period he achieves a psychological depth not previously noticed. And, having advanced from escapist illusion to engagement with reality, his outlook inevitably becomes less sanguine. The first germs of his pessimism are clearly present.

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Napoli milionaria! (1945)

“Ha da passà ’a nuttata.” This dramatic pronouncement at the end of Napoli milionaria! sums up best the post-war hopes of the Neapolitan playwright Eduardo De Filippo. In this play, written while Italy is still at war, Eduardo paints a dramatic picture of a city fighting to survive and ends by paraphrasing in a characteristically colorful Neapolitan expression, “This night too shall pass.” By sparing nothing, De Filippo confronts his audience with a stark picture of what they have become, earning for himself the well deserved title of forerunner of the Italian neorealist dramatists.

Napoli milionaria! opens the neorealist chapter in Eduardo’s body of work. The war had distanced Eduardo and his contemporaries from all that had gone before. And since, the widespread devastation of war had swept away the old, writers needed to find a new language for the new. In a contemporary interview with Ruggero Jacobbi, he tried to find his place in the original post-war intellectual milieu: “La guerra, io penso, ha fatto passare cent’anni. E se tanto tempo è trascorso, io ho bisogno, anzi il dovere, di scrivere dell’altro e di recitare diversamente.”

The play is about the Iovine family and deals with those dark sides of Italian life that had been glossed over in the euphoria of Liberation. The moral destruction of the Iovines begins in the middle of the war, 1942. All groceries have been rationed and the Neapolitan “arte di arrangiarsi” is in full swing. Amalia Iovine, together with her associate, Settebellizze, is running a discreet but profitable black market business from her tenement house. Using the friendly offer of a cup of coffee as a front, she sells flour, coffee, sugar, and potatoes on the black market. Her husband, Gennaro, is against this illicit business of hers, especially because whenever the police want to check the premises for the presence of contraband items, he is forced to literally play “dead” (a theme reminiscent of the commedia dell’arte “il finto morto”), so that the family can hide the forbidden goods under his bed. Already Gennaro is forced to be an unwilling accomplice in a humiliating scenario.

Several years pass during which the anti-hero protagonist, Gennaro Iovine, is a prisoner of war of the Germans. When he returns home he finds that the black market enterprise has lost all pretence of respectability. Amalia has taken up a relationship with

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15 Eduardo De Filippo, interview with Ruggero Jacobbi, Il Cosmopolita, 1 April 1945.
her partner and she has become hardened and rapacious, their daughter is pregnant with the child of an American soldier, and their son is engaged in thievery. The play ends, however, on a positive note: Gennaro comforts his wife Amalia with the final hopeful line: “Ha da passà ’a nuttata” (Napoli mil., Atto III, p. 98).

The text was written in about a month and rehearsed for only six days. It dealt with the pressing issues affecting Naples at the time: blackmarketing, prostitution, sin. The 1945 censorship approval stated:

Napoli Milionaria, si capisce, la Napoli della borsa nera e dei nuovi ricchi. L’arguta commedia fa centro su una famiglia tipica, arricchitasi durante la forzata assenza del capo, Don Gennaro, trattenuto lontano da eventi di guerra. Quando Don Gennaro torna, la febbre dei quattrini ha montato la testa a tutti, ma il livello morale della famiglia si è abbassato. […] La commedia intelligente e sottile si approva nel testo integrale.16

Napoli milionaria! would become the first play in Eduardo’s anthology Cantata dei giorni dispari (for Neapolitans the word “dispari” is slang and indicates things going the wrong way), and marked both the artistic separation from Peppino (he no longer needed to create farcical ad hoc roles to satisfy his brother) and the debut of Eduardo’s new company Il Teatro di Eduardo con Titina. It was performed one month before Italy’s liberation, on 25 March 1945, at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, to benefit the city’s orphans of war.17

In Napoli milionaria! the disintegration of family and of moral values is depicted with clarity. Here farce is in the background and is replaced by a slow-motion, close-up portrait of grim daily existence. Eduardo depicts a society devastated by air raids and poverty that no longer knows how to cope; after twenty years of fascist rule Italy has lost the spirit of community and its dignity. The drama of the Iovine family is a tale of deprivation and corruption. Napoli milionaria! represented a true watershed moment in Eduardo’s career, and he wanted his audience to be well aware of this new shift in focus. As he revealed to Jacobbi in 1945, “il teatro che voglio fare adesso è un teatro dove

16 ACS, MTS, Censura Teatrale 1946-1962, Napoli milionaria!, b.18, f. 589. The approval is signed by Bianchini, D’Ermo, Calvino, cited in Maria Procino Santarelli, Eduardo dietro le quinte (Rome: Bulzoni, 2003), p. 120.
17 A. Parente, “Lo spettacolo ha fruttato L. 230 Mila,” Il Risorgimento, March 27, 1945. The nett proceeds from the performance, Lire 232,790, were delivered to the mayor of the city. Naples had already been liberated during “le quattro giornate” in late September 1943 and the rest of Italy was liberated on 25 April, 1945.
The play is, nevertheless, carefully crafted and rich in allusions. The name Gennaro, quintessentially Neapolitan, also means Janus/January, the two-headed god who looks backwards and forwards, while Iovine/Juvenus celebrates youth and new beginnings. What is most worrisome for newly returned Gennaro/Eduardo is the fact that nobody wants to hear about the war because nobody wants to look back, “Nuie ce vulimme gudé nu poco ’e pace… Penzate ’a salute… Oramai è fernuto” (*Napoli mil.*, Atto II, p. 80).

Through Gennaro, Eduardo reminded Italians that simply pretending this sad and shameful chapter in Italian history never happened was not a viable solution, “Vuie ve sbagliate… ’A guerra nun è fernuta… E nun è fernuto niente!” (*Napoli mil.*, Atto II, p. 80). When Rituccia, their youngest daughter, falls gravely ill, Gennaro and Amalia must face each other and acknowledge that their life is devoid of all honesty. In the end, it is Gennaro’s silence, and not his words, that acts as a catalyst and provokes the confessions and sense of shame in the other characters. Since they do not have the antibiotic necessary to cure Rituccia, Amalia must turn to the very clients she has fleeced. Only at this point, does she realize how low she has stooped, and so the threads of all the misery of their life come together in a form of redemption. Amalia desires a return to the simple life and Gennaro chooses to not condemn her but to take a god-like stance and console her, by saying, what is perhaps the single most famous sentence of the De Filippian repertory: “S’ha da aspettà, Amà. Ha da passà ’a nuttata” (*Napoli mil.*, Atto III, p. 98).

Like Sik-Sik, Luca Cupiello, and later Guglielmo Speranza, Gennaro Iovine is a hero of everyday life who moves effortlessly between tragedy and comedy; revealing the razor thin edge that separates the two. In order to provoke a catharsis in the audience (the traditional outcome of tragedy), Eduardo often resorts to comic relief (whether it is through a funny line expressed in dialect or an amusing action like that of feigning death on a bed hiding food). Instead of using a noble personage as a protagonist, Eduardo’s tragic anti-hero has no obvious heroic qualities. And always De Filippo is concerned with constructing a reality as close to real life as the stage will allow. He starts with a slightly...
farcical premise: the family is an exaggerated and extreme case, ridicule is generated by allowing them to speak their own language. The novelty of De Filippo’s take on neorealism, however, consisted of his vision, his own perception of the scenery (for example, his representation of the cramped quarters of the Neapolitan bassi on the vast spaces of the average Italian proscenium arch stage), and his powerful acting presence. All neorealist authors looked to lower working class families for their subject matter, but Eduardo differed principally in that he made them funny, allowing us to smile and thus separate from them through the mechanism of humour.

Furthermore, he avoids the slow pace of much neorealist cinema by creating a family that looks neorealist but is intensely comic. He is also working in a fully professional medium, in contrast to the neorealist cinema directors who used untrained actors to provide authenticity on the screen. The audience is always aware that it is watching a play. As his widow pointed out to me in our phone interview, “Eduardo non descrive la realtà, altrimenti in Natale in casa Cupiello, quando si alzava dal letto Luca avrebbe dovuto andare a fare la pipì. Attraverso la realtà lui descrive i nostri pensieri, la nostra vita.” The veil of humour over reality has given way to a veil of reality over intense introspection.

In the 1977 edition of Napoli milionaria!, the final line, “Ha da passà ’a nuttata,” by then proverbial in Italian, is intentionally missing, foreshadowing the playwright’s growing pessimism. He explained in an interview in 1979: “[…] quella, nel ’43, era una battuta di speranza. Invece, ’a nuttata non è ancora passata, capisci? E chi ci crede più che passi? Può una nuttata durare trentaquattro anni?”

On his eightieth birthday, in 1984, Eduardo reiterated how it had been this very play, Napoli milionaria!, to really mark his move away from farces and force him to focus on the deeper issues he would then address most poignantly in Gli esami; “era finita La cantata dei giorni pari e cominciava La cantata dei giorni dispari. I giorni pari erano quelli che credevamo sereni.”

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19 Isabella De Filippo, telephone conversation with the author, 5 December 2004.
Filumena Marturano (1946)

With Filumena Marturano, staged at the Teatro Politeama in Naples on 7 November 1946, Eduardo fully realized his desire to create a complex character for a woman while exploring the paradoxes of family relationships. When Domenico Soriano, the man to whom Filumena has dedicated her entire life, intends to leave her to marry Diana, a much younger woman, Filumena pretends she is dying in order to obtain a marriage *in extremis*. She is interested not in money but in protecting her children. Domenico is the father of only one of these children but in one of the most memorable dialogues in the De Filippian repertoire, Filumena explains why for the sake of familial harmony (any sign of favoritism toward one son would inevitably pin one brother against the other) it is necessary to keep the son’s identity a secret from him: “quanno so’ gruosse, quanno song'uommene, o so’ figlie tutte quante, o so’ nemice.”

After the ‘anti-plot’ of *Napoli milionaria!* where ‘intrigue’ was reduced according to the author, to a bare minimum, Filumena Marturano returned to plot and deception for its basic structure, but maintained many of the devices of neorealism. Here, as in most of his other plays, the use of Neapolitan dialect is central to De Filippo’s realism and to involving the audience in that world. The figures of speech are colorful and remain closely in contact with the basic functions of daily life. Dialect is natural, genuine, intimate, where standard Italian is artificial, the mark of the interloper. Domenico’s new lover Diana, in fact, speaks standard Italian: she is an outsider who requires a translator.

De Filippo’s use of dialect generally helps create intimacy with the audience but at the same time to separate his characters from the sins of mainstream Italy (in order to maintain the humorous element reality often comes across in grotesque distortion).

Dialect involves the audience, making it part of a closed and intimate world. Paradoxically, dialect also separates the characters from the mainstream and the audience from the characters. Eduardo, however, in spite of his use of dialect, did not limit himself to Neapolitan audiences and did not cut himself off from a mainstream bourgeois

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Even though the distinctions between dialect and standard translation generally defy precise definition, the intimacy that the use of dialect allows transcends translation. Harold Acton remarked that:

Eduardo’s success is due to the fact that he reflects the experiences of his public and establishes a closer contact with it than his predecessors. […] As Henry James said of Coquelin, he shows “a mastery of that mixture of the appeal to the pity of things with the appeal to their absurdity” which succeeds with the Italians as well as with the French. This should also succeed with the English, and I hope that Eduardo’s company will soon bring Naples to London. 

In an interview with Renzo Nissim one year before his death Eduardo explained the international success of his so-called “teatro dialettale”: “Il mio mezzo di espressione è il dialettale, ma il contenuto è universale. […] La gente al di fuori è diversa, ma dentro, nell’intimo, ci assomigliamo tutti.”

The role of Pirandello

A major influence in Eduardo’s move towards the exploration of existential themes was that of the Sicilian dramatist Pirandello (1867-1936), who shared De Filippo’s commitment to dialect in theatre. The first meeting between the two playwrights occurred in 1933, but already fourteen years earlier Eduardo had been completely mesmerized by Pirandello’s Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore (1921):

I Sei personaggi mi avevano letteralmente scombussolato. Ci ripensai non so quanti giorni. Mi pareva impossibile continuare a far ridere la gente coi quadri delle riviste, quando, in altra sede, l’arte drammatica raggiungeva quella potenza e quella originalità di idée e di espressione.

Eduardo did not seek to imitate Pirandello or to compete with him during his lifetime. He did, however, collaborate with him. In 1937, they worked together on the play script of

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23 Filumena Marturano, translated into French by Fabrice Melquiot, was recently presented at the Théâtre Athénée Louis-Jouvet, Paris (2 March-1 April 2006) directed by Gloria Paris; see review by Stefano di Stefano, “Eduardo globale, ora tocca alla Francia,” Corriere della Sera, 16 February 2006.
26 De Filippo, Cantata dei giorni pari, p. 731.
the short story *L’abito nuovo* (1936). De Filippo admired the fact that Pirandello had not only been able to retain his Sicilian regionalism but actually to explore and promote it, writing in such a way as to make the whole issue of regionalism and dialect irrelevant to critical success. Pirandello helped De Filippo overcome what inferiority he may have felt due to his acknowledged Neapolitan regionalism. As they worked together on *L’abito nuovo*, “Lui dialogava, a voce, in lingua, ed io traducevo, a voce, in napoletano…. Talvolta io italianizzavo la mia parlata. E Pirandello, indignato: Ma no, figlio, come le senti, come le senti, le battute: non tradurre!”28 And, as we saw in Chapter 1, Eduardo interpreted the role of Ciampa in the 1944 production of Pirandello’s *Berretto a sonagli*, to the irritation of the Fascists and occupying forces.

By 1946, De Filippo started to write, *Questi fantasmi!*, generally acknowledged as the first work with Pirandellian overtones. He did not, however, come to be seen as “Pirandellian” until much later, if at all. For the purpose of this study the term “Pirandellian” in no way implies “copying the style of Pirandello” but merely helps indicate those points where Eduardo was most influenced by his encounter with Pirandello and how Pirandello played an important part in Eduardo’s philosophical development. The true extent of Pirandello’s influence occasionally became a thorny issue for Eduardo. And when critics accused him of imitating Pirandello he merely retorted: “Tutti noi scrittori e anche tutti noi uomini dobbiamo molto al genio di Pirandello. Quando Arthur Miller dice che se non ci fosse stato lui, egli scriverebbe diversamente, dice cosa giusta, ma quando si volesse accusare Miller di Pirandellismo, ecco, sarebbe inaccettabile.”29

**Questi fantasmi!** (1946)

*Questi fantasmi!*30 opened at the Teatro Eliseo in Rome on 7 January 1946 and is one of Eduardo’s most original scripts.31 The choice of the national capital must have been

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31 Biagio Coscia, “John Turturro: che sfida fare Eduardo a Napoli,” *Corriere della Sera*, 15 January, 2006. Michael Feingold’s translation of *Souls of Naples* was performed by John Turturro and by the Theatre for A New Audience Company and directed by Roman Paska at the Duke on 42nd St in New York City (14
deliberate and, as we shall see, the play deals indirectly with national political issues, but the plot of *Questi fantasmi!* has a decidedly Neapolitan flavor. It exploits superstition – fear of the dead, readiness to believe in ghosts – locating it in that exotic ‘other’ world of Naples but creating intimacy and humour through the use of domestic authenticity and dialect.

Pasquale Lojacono finds himself in the paradoxical situation of living in an old *palazzo* that is supposedly haunted by ghosts. The owner cannot rent the apartments out, so he allows Pasquale and his wife to live in one of them on the condition that he will beat rugs out of every window and generally give the impression to all potential tenants that everything is just fine. The only real “spirit” is that of the wife’s lover and the comic suspense depends on Pasquale’s relationship with him, and on the final doubt that remains to the end, as to whether even Pasquale knows him to be the lover but conveniently chooses to close an eye.

Pasquale Lojacono is an everyday hero struggling to hold on to his aspirations. He has been whipped but not cowed, at least not yet; he relies on his wits. But he stands for much more: Pasquale’s confusion and his complicity in his own deception reflect the political situation around him and the nation’s continuing uncertainty and lack of moral compass in the years immediately following the war.

The ghosts, conveniently allowed to stay, can be interpreted as metaphors of Fascism and the atrocities of war. They are the reminder Eduardo wanted to give his audience that these ghosts have lingered on. The humiliating poverty of the protagonist, Pasquale Lojacono, is a scathing indictment of postwar Italy’s financial ruin and through him Eduardo accuses the nation for ignoring the need for renewal: “‘A vita è tosta e nisciuno ti aiuta, o meglio ce sta chi t’aiuta ma una vota sola, pe’ putè di’: ‘t’aggio aiutato’ (*Fantasmi*, Atto I, p. 142). But unlike the neorealist dramas that precede it, *Questi fantasmi!* moves beyond these domestic and social themes and marks Eduardo’s slightly surreal foray into the psychological and philosophical themes of man’s understanding of his own existence.

The spectator is confronted with Eduardo’s view of reality and illusion, and of the need man has to believe in whatever perceived reality he has made up for himself. In a scene that is equal measure commedia dell’arte and Pirandellian, the ‘ghost’s’ wife and her family appears to Pasquale in order to convince him to put an end to the affair that his wife is having with her husband. In the detailed descriptions of the characters, Eduardo consciously parodies the entrance of Pirandello’s Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore. The humorous situation makes for incomparable and memorable Eduardian dialogue:

**ARMIDA** (con tono di voce opaco). Signore, voi in me non vedete una donna, in queste figure non vedete una famiglia…. Voi vedete cinque fantasmi!

**PASQUALE** (rassicurato dalla dolcezza di voce di Armida). Accomodatevi.

**ARMIDA** (accettando di buon grado l’invito). Grazie. (Tutti prendono le sedie e si siedono a loro volta.) Io sono morta un anno e mezzo fa.

**PASQUALE** Ah è recente. (Tuono in lontananza.)

**ARMIDA** Queste due figure di adolescenti…. (Li mostra) Pulisciti il naso, tu…(Col fazzoletto pulisce il naso alla femmina) E tu…(al maschio che in quel momento è in preda al tic) smettila, controllati…. Lo fai apposta…(A Pasquale) È uno spirito di contraddizione…. Queste due figure di adolescenti, vi dicevo, sono due morticini. (Tuono più forte. Armida, tragica per la sua freddezza) Io fui uccisa mentre amavo, nell’istante in cui le vibrazioni del mio cuore, del mio animo, dei miei sensi…capitemi, toccavano l’acme della completa, capitemi, completa felicità…

**PASQUALE** Proprio in quel momento?…. Che peccato! (Fantasmi, Atto II, p. 168).

The witty play on words, the farce and the visual gags, and above all, the standard lazzo of making Pasquale believe – against all reasonable evidence – that his wife’s lover is something else: these are all standard devices in Eduardo, and reminiscent of the old farcical reviews, but here they are updated. Farce is no longer aimed solely at arousing explosive laughter with crude means. Even as absurdity replaces plausibility it soon becomes clear that Pasquale is forced to pretend that he believes in the ghosts only because of the degrading situation he finds himself in.
While the parody reminds one of Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore*, the protagonist Pasquale bears a striking resemblance to Pirandello’s *Enrico IV*. At the heart of both dramas there is a betrayal by a woman. While “the man known as Enrico” pretends to believe the illusions he has created to find a way of dealing with the betrayal by his beloved, Pasquale forces himself to believe in illusions in the misplaced hope that the money he earns with this belief will help him win back his wife. However, by acquiescing to this deplorable situation succeeds merely in alienating her even more. Each man is forced to hide from a bitter reality behind a veil of illusion, but while *Enrico IV* is lucid and knows that he is not *Enrico IV* (until he is cast back again into madness at the end), Pasquale keeps the game of illusion ambiguous until the conclusion. Each of these characters flees life in order to live and retires to a world inhabited by its own “ghosts.” Each is therefore condemned to eternal isolation exacerbated by the impossibility of sharing with others what they alone “see.” At the climax of *Questi fantasmi!*, Pasquale finds that the only person that he can confide in is the ghost, “Con un altro uomo, cu’ n’ommo comm’a me, nun avarrìa parlato: ma cu’ te si, cu’ te pozzo parlà, tu si n’ata cosa” (*Fantasmi*, Atto III, p. 181).

The verdict reached by both these playwrights is that illusion is at times necessary to make our lives more tolerable: it does not completely displace reality, it merely transforms it. For Pirandello certainly there is no absolute reality but only individual perceptions of it, and they are all different. Pirandello seldom tells us which is the “real” reality.

De Filippo, on the other hand, is much more ironic: we the audience are aware of the truth even if the protagonist is not, and humour comes from our perception of the discrepancy between our awareness and the protagonist’s awareness and the sense of superiority this gives us. And while Pirandello’s characters attempt to escape from life because they know it is impossible to live there, Lojacono resorts to a more accommodating, Neapolitan solution. Mario Mignone aptly points out, “De Filippo’s play is no intellectual dialectic, but a warm effusion of feelings in which the Pirandellian disquisitions about truth and pretense, illusion and reality, are replaced by a Neapolitan

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way of life which reflects the same relativistic, existential problems.”

It allows one to feel, as Pasquale Lojacono does, that as long as one can sip a good cup of coffee on the balcony life is still worth living in spite of all its faults:

A noialtri napoletani, toglieteci questo poco di sfogo fuori al balcone. […] Io, per esempio, a tutto rinuncierei, tranne a questa tazzina di caffè, presa tranquillamente qua, fuori al balcone, dopo quell’oretta di sonno che uno si è fatta dopo mangiato.

Unlike Pirandello, however, Eduardo takes advantage of all the color and vitality provided by Neapolitan jokes with the result that while a Pasquale may never reach the intellectual heights of an Enrico IV, in the end he does appear more human.

Though Mignone claimed that the play contained no intellectual dialectic, many ironically accused De Filippo of attempting to overburden with transcendental and intellectual meaning what most saw as an essentially Scarpettian farcical scene. The truth was that Eduardo skillfully treaded a middle path and blended in an original ensemble the fantastical with the grotesque, the humorous with the pathetic. It was a return to his commedia dell’arte origins and to the world of age-old superstitions, but here they were shown in a new light. De Filippo wanted to show that the war had changed even the ghosts who came to haunt us and thanks to the humorous scenes and clever dialogue, he produced one of his most popular and enduring plays.

La grande magia (1948)

La grande magia was staged for the first time at the Teatro Verdi in Trieste on 30 October 1948, and although the protagonist is in a way reminiscent of the magician Sik-Sik, the play represents a significant step from ‘un teatro di cronaca quotidiana’ to one that actively attempts to explore the complexities of the human condition. With this play, Eduardo is clearly favoring his role as author over that of actor, but while the disparate elements of commedia dell’arte, farce and Pirandellismo, had reached a happy equilibrium in Questi fantasmi! here they they seem a little more forced.

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33 Mignone, Eduardo De Filippo, p. 98.
34 De Filippo, Questi fantasmi! Atto II, p.153.
The protagonist of the play is a magician named Otto Marvuglia, who is paid to play a small trick on a jealous husband, Calogero Di Spelta (the naïve character who becomes the anti-hero). Otto Marvuglia makes the man’s wife vanish so that she can have a fifteen minute rendez-vous with her lover but the plot becomes complicated when the lovers run away. The magician hastily comes up with a metaphysical explanation for the suspicious husband. He informs Calogero that his wife is now in a small box that he hands over to him and that she will only reappear if he has complete belief that she really is in the box (the faith must be blind because he is not allowed to open the box). If he lacks this faith and opens the box prematurely he risks losing her forever. The dilemma that Calogero faces is exacerbated by the presence of Marvuglia’s “taunting audience” (as well as the real one) waiting to see what he will do.

As the play progresses through a series of illusions within illusions, we see that the husband, like Pasquale Lojacono, refuses the real world he is faced with and, in order to survive and maintain his identity as a husband, he creates for himself another reality, in which his wife really is in the box. In the last scene, Calogero foreshadows some of the existential angst of Gugliemo,


He maintains the illusion that he has a choice, and refuses to be afraid. The play is not just about maintaining illusions. It is also about the failure of relationships, the total breakdown of communication between Calogero and his wife, to the point that she disappears: “Si era stabilito un gelo, fra me e lei. Io non parlavo. Lei nemmeno. Non le facevo più un complimento, una tenerezza. Non riuscivamo più ad essere sinceri, semplici. Non eravamo più amanti!” (Magia, Atto III, p. 375).

Calogero’s wife in the meantime has tired of life with her lover. She returns at this very last moment and confides to him her adulterous behavior and her wish to repent. The hitch is that she has arrived a moment too soon since Calogero never actually opens the

36 The name Otto Marvuglia suggests ‘Eight wonders’; Calogero Di Spelta suggests ‘Hot Old Hayseed’.
box that supposedly contains her (and because of her early entry he realizes that the magician’s trick was a sham). As in Pirandello, here the nature of truth and illusions are being put to the test. If Calogero were to now acknowledge the return of his adulterous wife it would destroy the illusions he has been living with for the past four years. In order to save face and maintain the identity and reality he has created for himself, he decides almost brutally to dismiss her as a simple apparition. Otto Marvuglia expresses the need man has to create illusions to protect us from the harsh realities of life. The heartless nature of the deception inherent in these illusions is best articulated in the magician’s description of a brutal magic trick he performs involving the disappearance of a canary:


But is the ability to create illusions really such a privilege? Ultimately, Eduardo condemns Calogero’s refusal to look reality in the face; he is inciting us to look beyond life’s illusions and tricks, in order to acknowledge and do something about the injustices that surround us. “Eduardo is saying not only ‘such is the wonder of fairy land’ but also ‘such is the perverseness of reality.’ He has not surrendered to melodrama; he has exploited it.”

With this play, Eduardo was criticized by the public for trying to elevate the language by minimizing the use of dialect. Many claimed that he had lost that flavor which characterized his former works, almost as though he could not treat lofty subjects in dialect. In the play, however, there is dialect and Eduardo is using it for a purpose: he slips in and out of dialect, usually reserving Italian for the “public” performance and dialect for the “private.”

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In *La grande magia*, Eduardo was certainly echoing Pirandello’s disillusionment with life and reality but, after the audience openly accused him of copying Pirandello, he was so disappointed by this oversimplification that he refused to ever perform this play again. Even one of his most favorable reviewers, Federico Frascani, was critical, “*La grande magia* – la sola opera di Eduardo, che risenta anche nel contenuto dell’influsso di Pirandello e in maniera del tutto negativa […] Questa volta Eduardo, sollecitato da un’intuizione confusa, non ha trovato la via giusta per esprimersi […]”

After the 20 January 1950 performance at the Teatro Eliseo in Rome, Eduardo decided to remove *La grande magia* from his company’s repertoire and never perform it again. De Filippo did, however, direct the television version which was screened 19 February 1964 on Rai Due. The play returned to the stage in a Giorgio Strehler production at the Teatro Piccolo in Milan on 6 May 1985 and has been performed abroad in Russia, Germany, Finland, Spain, and Edinburgh.

**Le voci di dentro** (1948)

*Le voci di dentro*, a work of extreme pessimism, captures the feeling of disillusionment experienced in Italy following the initial euphoria of liberation and the elections of 1948. The play was written in only seven days to use as a substitute when Eduardo’s sister Titina, who was suffering from angina at the time and had an important role in *La grande magia*, was too ill to go on stage. “Si doveva debuttare a Milano al Teatro Nuovo con *La grande magia*, in cui Titina aveva un ruolo dominante, ma si ammalò improvvisamente e fui costretto a pensare ad una nuova commedia in cui la sua presenza non fosse indispensabile.”

*Le voci di dentro*, staged for the first time at the Teatro Nuovo in Milan on 11 December 1948, is almost a suspense-thriller. English critic John Francis Lane, noted that, “The *Inner Voices* are the voices of conscience and make this one of De Filippo’s most moralistic works which only on the surface seems like a farce in typically

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38 See Introduction.
Neapolitan fashion but, with its ambiguities and unanswered questions, enters Pirandello territory.”

Alberto Saporito (played by Eduardo) dreams that one of his neighbors has committed a murder. Rather than deny the accusation, each member of the next-door family is quick not only to believe the veracity of the dream but also to accuse one another of the crime, even after Alberto has realized that it was all just a dream.

Using this suspected murder as his plot, Eduardo stages the breakdown of community where each member is pitted against the other and where, even within the social microcosm of the family, there is suspicion and guilt. Now Italians are disillusioned by the promises of the past, “Ma allora la vita era un’altra cosa. Era, diciamo, tutto più facile; e la gente era pura, genuina. Uno si sentiva la coscienza a posto […] Mo si sono imbrogliate le lingue” (Le voci, Atto I, p. 397). Such loss of hope, combined with a sense of duty to see only the worst in those around him, makes Alberto Saporito’s pessimism the clear forerunner of Guglielmo Speranza’s in Gli esami.

Alberto’s isolation and estrangement from his neighbors and family is played out in his relationship with his uncle, Zi’ Nicola, also a forerunner of Guglielmo in Gli esami, when he revolts silently against humanity and chooses to communicate only through fireworks. Eduardo described him twenty years later:

Zi’ Nicola, lo strampalato personaggio che si è chiuso in se stesso, non parla, comunica con gli altri a botti, a razzi, una specie di essenziale alfabeto Morse che non concede nulla alla divagazione; è un precursore dell’alienato, un pensatore dei “Bassi” che ignora di avere scoperto la incomunicabilità.

As Eduardo’s son, actor Luca De Filippo pointed out to me, both Zi’ Nicola and then Guglielmo die shortly after they have given up speaking; for them silence represents the refusal to live. The characters in Le voci have completely lost that sense of humanity and family unity that were so fundamental in Eduardo’s neorealist dramas. This is the real tragedy as Alberto points out,

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45 Luca De Filippo, conversation with the author, 9 November 2004.
Mo volete sapere perché siete assassini? E che v’è o dico a ffa’? Chisto, mo, è o fatto ’e zi’ Nicola […]. Parlo inutilmente? In mezzo a voi, forse, ci sono anch’io, e non me ne rendo conto. Avete sospettato l’uno dell’altro […]. Un assassino lo avete messo nelle cose normali di tutti i giorni […] il delitto lo avete messo nel bilancio di famiglia! La stima, […] l’abbiamo uccisa […]. E vi sembra un assassino da niente? Senza la stima si può arrivare al delitto” (Le voci, Atto III, p. 437).

The sudden appearance of the sun after the last words are spoken makes a silent though perhaps illusory promise of better times to come. The stage direction reads: “Il sole inaspettatamente, dal finestrone in fondo, taglia l’aria ammorbata dello stanzone e, pietosamente, vivifica le stremenzite figure dei due fratelli e quelle povere, sgangherate sedie, le quali, malgrado tutto, saranno ancora provate dalle ormai svogliate ‘feste’ e ‘festicciolle’ dei poveri vicoli napoletani” (Le voci, Atto III, p. 438). It is not ironic or designed to destroy the theatrical illusion. It is like the last name of Guglielmo Speranza in Gli esami, a paradoxical gesture of optimism, an act of faith in a faithless world. The play, written in just a week, was received very well by both critics and audience.

Social battles, private demons, and the Catholic church

The optimism that Eduardo expressed in Napoli milionaria!, was steadily waning by the fifties and the reasons for De Filippo’s increasing pessimism can no longer be found in Fascism or in the consequent moral squalor of post-war Naples. In the analysis of the following plays, De Pretore Vincenzo (1957) and Il contratto (1967), it is clear how Eduardo moves from fantasies in the novellistic tradition to issues of public morality that affected him personally. In doing so, he ran into ecclesiastical censorship.

De Pretore Vincenzo, staged at the Teatro de’ Servi in Rome on 26 April 1957, is a surrealistic comedy about a thief who, after being shot, dreams he is in heaven and finds himself in the absurd predicament of having to explain to God what an illegitimate child is:

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47 The play De Pretore Vincenzo began its life as a poem in hendecasyllables, Vincenzo de Pretore (1948) published in O Canisto (Naples: 1971, Edizioni Teatro San Ferdinando), p. 150. The source for the play was a fiaba, told to him by his grandmother Concetta, about a thief who spends Christmas in prison and not, as a disappointed fan had claimed, from a story by Alexander Dumas called I borboni di Napoli; see Maurizio Giammusso, Vita di Eduardo (Milan: Mondadori, 1993), p. 268.
**Signore**
Tu ti chiami Vincenzo?

**De Pretore**
Sissignore.

**Signore**
E di cognome?

**De Pretore**
Faccio De Pretore.

**Signore**
Tuo padre?

**De Pretore**
De Pretore fuie mammà.

**Signore**
Come sarebbe?

**De Pretore**
Io so’ di padre ignoto.

**Signore**
Non capisco…. Ma ignoto di che cosa?

**De Pretore**
Che quando sulla terra non si sposa, ‘e figlie nun se ponno dichiarà…

**Signore**
Ma i figli sono figli!

**De Pretore**
Niente affatto

Voi vi credete che so’ tutte eguale,
Ma ‘e figlie, nterra, si nun so’ legale,
campano comme ponno; c’hanna fa’? (*De Pretore*, Parte seconda, p. 236).

With *De Pretore Vincenzo* Eduardo wanted to point to a Catholic Church partially responsible for the absurd situation in which many children find themselves. He denounced, in this play and in the next, the materialistic side of a church that was growing increasingly distant from what people faced, “Una candela ogni tanto, nu lumino, na lampa uoglio. Olio voglion i santi […]]. Se non hai un santo che ti protegge, non ti riesce mai niente nella vita” (*De Pretore*, Parte prima, p. 206).

When *De Pretore Vincenzo* was suspended after only four performances for being offensive to the Catholic Church,48 De Filippo felt that once again he was being misunderstood, “Si chiuse il Teatro dei Servi per De Pretore Vincenzo; dopo quattro

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48 The play *De Pretore Vincenzo* was suspended after only four days by the Public Security Office but reopened in May of that same year at the Teatro Valle; see Barsotti, “Nota storico-critica,” p. 179. The play did undergo some form of self-censorship before returning on stage at the Teatro Odeon in Milan; see Giammusso, *Vita di Eduardo*, p. 271.
rappresentazioni a teatri esauriti, la polizia alle porte del teatro cacciò via il pubblico per il bavero; e non furono espresse ragioni, il motivo non si è mai saputo.”49 Aggeo Savioli caustically remarked that the so-called,

Servì di Maria (evidentemente più servi del cardinale Micara che della Beata Vergine) buttarono fuori dal teatro, la cui proprietà era loro, compagnia e commedia. […] Non tolleravano, insomma, che Eduardo (ben laico per proprio conto) avesse infuso nelle sue creature quella religiosità popolare, per cui tra l’uomo, o la donna, e la divinità o il singolo santo, si stabilisce una sorta di relazione fiduciaria, ai limiti dell’omertà, sprezzante delle leggi e delle convenzioni ufficiali.50

Eduardo argued that the play, criticized for its portrayal of the saints and for being based on outdated and superstitious beliefs, was actually a moral and Christian tale based on Gospel doctrines. “Certo la chiesa in quanto istituto non è nelle grazie del drammaturgo: almeno quando s’incarna in figure come quella petulante e ossessiva di Don Ciccuzza che, negli Esami, tormenta l’agonia di Guglielmo Speranza.”51

Many of Eduardo’s characters fight the unjust stigma placed on illegitimate children: from Filumena Marturano, who resorts to faking her own death in order to have her children recognized by the father, to Vincenzo De Pretore who, in place of a real father, resorts to inventing an imaginary, noble one, up to Gugliemo Speranza, who is humiliated by having his own fatherhood questioned.

For Eduardo, born from an extra-marital union, the theme of illegitimacy was a very personal one, although his real parentage, long known in artistic circles, was not openly revealed until the seventies with the publication of his brother Peppino’s autobiography Una famiglia difficile (1977). In response to the moralists who stigmatized the blameless child, Eduardo was caustic, “La paternità dei figli legittimi è sempre dubbia. Quella degli illegittimi, al contrario, viene accertata col consenso popolare e diventa sacrosanta. La mia paternità è indiscutibile!”52

De Filippo’s own children, Luca and Luisella, were born from his relationship with actress Thea Prandi, while he was still legally married to his first wife, Dorothy Pennington. He could only make them legitimate many years later when he was able to

52 De Filippo, Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite, p. 8.
obtain an annulment of his first marriage and marry their mother. In the years before divorce was legalized (1971), an unhappy marriage was like a prison where murder was the only way out, as exemplified in the bitter comedy *Divorzio all’italiana* (1961) by Pietro Germi and Dario Fo’s farce, *I cadaveri si spediscono, le donne si spogliano* (1958). In his play, *L’Arte della Commedia*, De Filippo has a priest claim the need for a law on divorce, “Se da una parte i mariti e le mogli non riescono più a sopportare la catena del matrimonio, anche io, dall’altra, sono stufo di incatenarli. Da un pezzo, ormai, quando celebro un matrimonio, non ho più l’impressione di essere un sacerdote, ma un fabbro!”

With *De Pretore Vincenzo*, Eduardo wanted to show the world that the real victims are the children; but people were not yet ready to hear. In creating the character of Vincenzo, De Filippo was inspired by that early childhood image of social injustice witnessed in the Corte Minorile of Naples, discussed in the Introduction.

Il contratlo (1967)

In one of his last plays, *Il contratlo*, which premiered at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice on 12 October 1967, Eduardo De Filippo, portrayed the church as an institution that profited from the natural fear men have of dying and used the promise of resurrection as a bargaining tool to keep men in tow.

In this Faustian parody, the protagonist, Geronta Sebezio, is a guru in a small town who promises in a written contract to bring Gaetano Trocina back from the dead at no

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54 De Filippo, *I capolavori di Eduardo*, p. VIII.
cost. In exchange Gaetano Trocina must merely love his fellow men and open his arms and house to his poorest and most hated relative.

The crisis of the family unfolds in all its relentless fury when Gaetano’s relatives discover that by a contract previously worked out with Geronta, most of the estate goes to the hated relative. Furthermore, Gaetano’s resuscitation depends on the strength of their love for him which proves to be nonexistent. These “parenti terribili” are closely related to those from Le voci di dentro, La grande magia, and Gli esami non finiscono mai.

Because of his secular Christianity (“anche se non sono cattolico, sono però cristiano”\(^56\)), Eduardo, in representing the ancient conflict between good and evil, must confront the existential questions facing man in a different way from those who rely on faith and are constrained by dogma. Intolerant of the society that surrounded him and critical of the Catholic church, he was forced to interiorize man’s most pressing issues and by doing so develop a personalized religious belief that he attempted to illustrate through his many characters.

De Filippo saw life as a journey in which man, who is at odds with society, must find the inner strength to overcome his failings and help both himself and his fellow men reach spiritual redemption. The altruistic attempt to illuminate others is poignantly missing only in Gli esami, making this play essential in understanding Eduardo’s conclusions on life and man.

Siiamo arrivati al capolinea: the existential pessimism of Gli esami non finiscono mai (1973)

The aim of this chapter has been to present an artistic itinerary by reviewing those plays that represent the most significant steps in the development of Eduardo’s philosophy. At the end of his journey as a playwright, De Filippo writes a play about despair that is not despairing. That play is Gli esami non finiscono mai, “un dramma esistenziale dove è presente il suo tema più ricorrente: la crisi della famiglia.”\(^57\) Throughout this chapter, we have seen many of the themes that come together in this last play, which he wrote at the


\(^57\) Luca De Filippo, conversation with the author, 9 November 2004.
age of 73 and staged on 21 December 1973 at the Teatro La Pergola in Florence. Now, the aging actor, in a virtuoso performance played the three ages of his protagonist, as a young man, middle aged man, and finally as an old man on his death bed. Here death has a different meaning and becomes a living thing; the traditional play-making process has been all but abandoned and the true message is in what we are not seeing rather than what is being played out on stage.

It is the story of a man unable to escape people’s expectations of him resulting in his ever increasing sense of isolation. The basic plot was formulated twenty years earlier but Eduardo felt Italy could not swallow such a bleak portrait of the family nucleus.58

Unlike the earlier plays examined in this chapter, where the protagonist such as Gennaro Iovine in *Napoli milionaria!* showed the other characters the error of their ways and encouraged them to undergo a moral transformation, here we find an inertia of characters and an immobility that make the outcome inevitable: the anti-hero dies an unheroic death, mourned insincerely by those around him. This passivity slowly slips into our own consciousness as we realize the pain of just being alive; we are haunted by the knowledge of our own solitude. The impersonality of the new, modern world is accentuated by the fact that we can no longer trace any discernible feelings in the characters surrounding Speranza (they represent the society we live in). Unlike the earlier plays where the sense of community is ultimately the only way through which we can hope to be saved, here, there is no help forthcoming from the outside. Our only hope is to look inside because all compassion and connection with the outer world has disappeared.

By 1959, along with the other neorealist artists, such as Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini, Eduardo had become Italy’s ambassador to the world. “Eduardo è l’autore italiano più rappresentato all’estero, l’hanno tradotto in tutte le lingue. Nell’URSS, quaranta compagnie rappresentano contemporaneamente Mia Famiglia.”59 But though he was popular with audiences all over the world, he always felt that his many appeals to the authorities asking for social change made from the stage and illustrated in this chapter, had gone unheeded. Shortly before her death in January 2005,

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Eduardo’s widow Isabella described to me, his consequent feelings of exasperation: “si sentiva sconfortato, ‘ma io che scrivo a fare se nessuno mi ascolta’.”

From Sik-Sik (Sik-Sik) to Luca Cupiello (Natale in casa Cupiello) to Zio Nicola (Le voci di dentro) up until Guglielmo (Gli esami), all the protagonists of the plays examined in this chapter, have been individuals at odds with society and its institutions, a situation at the basis of Eduardo’s moral, religious, and social credo. And if the principal mission of the Catholic Church is to reassure man with the promise of life after death, Eduardo has his alter-ego Guglielmo, his very last creation, transcend this basic human necessity by having him display no fear of death. “Guglielmo non avverte il senso di ridicolo che, da vivo, egli temeva gli sarebbe caduto addosso da morto, anzi si diverte” (Gli esami, Atto III, p. 597). And in a grotesque finale at the end of the play Guglielmo witnesses his own eulogy and funeral and the discovery of this ability is both enlightening and empowering.

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60 Isabella De Filippo, telephone conversation with the author, 5 December 2004.
Chapter 4
A Study in Analogy: O’Neill, Miller, and Shakespeare

“L’eroe di questa commedia non è un tipo,
bensì il prototipo di noi tutti.”

In order to undertake an examination of the philosophical shift that brought Eduardo De Filippo from writing the farces of the twenties to presenting the existential drama that is *Gli esami non finiscono mai*, it is important to analyze new and unexplored factors which might have influenced him. A close scrutiny and translation of *Gli esami* brings to mind in particular two American authors: Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neill and the English playwright William Shakespeare. And so this chapter, moving beyond the socio-political factors discussed in Chapter 1 and the more commonly cited examples of Pirandello or neorealism discussed in Chapter 3, will explore his assimilation of the works of Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953), Arthur Miller (1915-2005) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

The two American playwrights were contemporaries of Eduardo and their plays were highly acclaimed when staged in Italy during the fifties. Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) made its Italian and European debut in 1951 at the Teatro Eliseo, the state subsidized teatro stabile in Rome. The play, with the Italian title, *Morte di un commesso viaggiatore*, was directed by Luchino Visconti, with two of the most popular actors of the time, Paolo Stoppa and Rita Morelli, along with a very young Marcello Mastroianni. In that same year, along with Miller, De Filippo was also on the playbill at the Eliseo with *Le voci di dentro* (1948).

O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (written in 1941, but staged and published only posthumously in 1956) was performed in 1957, in Italy just one year after its English publication. Directed by Virginio Puecher, it was presented at the Teatro Piccolo in Milan, the most prestigious Italian teatro stabile, with the title *Lungo viaggio verso la notte*. This was a controversial year for Eduardo, whose play about a small time thief

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dialoguing with saints in paradise, *De Pretore Vincenzo*, had been denounced by the Catholic Church and ironically forced to move from the Teatro dei Servi, a small hall, belonging to the Servite religious order, to the much larger Roman theatre, the Teatro Valle.

In this chapter, I shall attempt to show how some key aspects of *Gli esami non finiscono mai* are anticipated and perhaps consciously shaped by Eduardo’s understanding of these two works: O’Neill’s autobiographical *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, plays which best represent how they moved effortlessly within the darkest realms of realism to uncover the existential truths buried within. These two plays, with their journeys toward death, written more than two decades earlier, along with Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, seem to foreshadow De Filippo’s own play of death: *Gli esami non finiscono mai*.

*Long Day’s Journey into Night* is Eugene O’Neill’s last work, so personal and painful that he requested it be published only after his death. Considered by many to be his masterpiece, the story recounts a single day in the life of the Tyrone family and the action takes place in August 1912 at their summer home in Connecticut. As the drama unfolds, all the private demons which tormented O’Neill’s own life are soon revealed: the mother’s morphine addiction, the alcoholism, the failed ambitions, and bitterness of all four members of the family.

Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, is a family drama in which alienation from society and failure to achieve the American dream ultimately determine the unraveling of the central figure, Willy Loman. The other characters are all in some way dependent on this father figure who is increasingly at odds with the outside world and is slowly becoming unhinged, because he “is literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present.” In De Filippo’s *Gli esami non finiscono mai*, that terrible moment and place is reached when the protagonist, Gugliemo Speranza comes to the realization that after a life-long submission to constant, useless exams put forward by hypocritical friends, family and society, his only solution is to seek refuge in silence.

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I have chosen to use the two plays *Long Day’s Journey* and *Death of a Salesman*, because in many ways they are analogous to *Gli esami*, and help direct attention to important aspects of Eduardo’s last body of work. Wandering into uncharted territory, as it were, yielded an outcome beyond expectations and helped support my thesis that De Filippo is a much more complex playwright than is commonly acknowledged. The many similarities in content and style Eduardo shares with O’Neill and Miller, who wrote their plays years earlier, lead one to believe that these two foreign dramatists, possibly more than any other during Eduardo’s life, had a significant impact on transforming him into the existential thinker of his later period.

Their work encouraged De Filippo to dig deep inside the soul of his characters seeking truth within domestic walls, analysing family and society with the hope of ultimately achieving a better understanding of himself and consequently of man. In contrast, Shakespeare’s *Tempest* served De Filippo, as an inspiration.

**The common man as hero**

In the 1988 preface to his collected plays, Arthur Miller attempted to rebut those critics of *Death of a Salesman* (1949), who had complained that it just was not possible for a common man dealing with common problems to be something extraordinary; in other words for an ordinary man to be a hero. In modern drama, the forerunners of this controversial practice were Miller and O’Neill in America and De Filippo in Italy. By embracing the concept of the common man as hero, Eduardo made the definite move away from the adaptation of French *pochades* that Neapolitan comedy had become associated with; he could finally get closer to the realism he yearned for. Even more importantly it provided him with the sounding board for the existential questions he needed answers to. He was no longer satisfied with the mere representation of man’s daily struggle but needed to find the answer to why we should bother to struggle at all. But can the hero, and a tragic one at that, be a common salesman? A Luca Cupiello or a Gugliemo Speranza?

By traditional standards, it seemed impossible that someone of humble background could ever be a tragic hero. But with *Death of a Salesman*, Miller fights this view: “the play was always heroic to me, and in later years the academy’s charge that Willy lacked
the ‘stature’ for the tragic hero seemed incredible to me. I had not understood that these matters are measured by Greco-Elizabethan paragraphs which hold no mention of insurance payments […]"\(^3\) According to Miller, the real reason why a common man lacks heroic stature in, for example, a slave society, is simply because he has no options, consequently, drama and tragedy can only be a viable part of life for the higher echelons of society. Miller posits that in present times, “the lasting appeal of tragedy is due to our need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life.”\(^4\)

As we trace the development of Eduardo’s own philosophy, these considerations acquire resonance as his protagonist too can boast of an anti-hero status. A classic tragic hero like Oedipus, Macbeth, or Lear, has power and the trappings that go with it (represented by costume, grand scenery, deferential servants, big stages, grand rhetorical speeches); and they have hubris, insolent pride that causes them to lose everything, catastrophe leading to catharsis.

In the modern tragedies, exemplified by O’Neill, Miller and De Filippo, we are repeatedly faced with a man who is pitted against society, questioning himself and others. The primary objective of the anti-hero therefore becomes fighting the deceptiveness of life and battling against the futility of a miserly existence. The common man as hero has to find his power somewhere else. The dramatists pay careful attention to crafting the relationships with realistic dialogue, because the rhetorical conventions are no longer there.

In Eduardo’s earlier dramas, such as *Napoli milionario!* (1945) and *Filumena Marturano* (1946), there is a greater sense of hope than in the works by Miller and O’Neill of the same period. Unlike Miller and O’Neill (in these plays at least), De Filippo provides a possibility for resolution through the enlightenment experienced first by the protagonist himself and then communicated to those around him. The explanation for this optimism may be that in De Filippo’s neorealist dramas the characters are still greatly conditioned by outside elements such as the sense of hope surrounding the reconstruction following the devastation caused by war. This is a De Filippo-specific theme foreign to Miller and O’Neill, who deal instead with themes such as the immigrant’s status in

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\(^3\) Miller, *Introduction*, p. 31.

\(^4\) Miller, *Introduction*, p. 33.
America and the alienation caused by an increasingly materialistic world. In their work the feelings of inadequacy and anguish are closely linked to the economic and social status of the characters and to their awareness of not belonging. As the years pass, however, Eduardo’s pessimism grows and he slowly reveals the disintegration of his characters’ moral values and the reason behind their malaise.

**Family ghosts: realism and escapism**

De Filippo creates family scenarios similar to those portrayed by Miller and O’Neill. All three playwrights force the family into close contact in order to represent its disintegration, the tensions between its members, and the complete collapse of communication.

As Eduardo nears the end of his life and artistic career, his work becomes darker and bleaker. His characters are less connected to each other (family themes are less explored) and he regresses more and more to the use of non-language (the mime of the *commedia dell’arte*) to express the alienation of his anti-hero. The climax of his disillusionment with mankind and society is of course represented by Gugliemo Speranza, the protagonist who resorts to silence and gesture in his last work, *Gli esami*.

Many years earlier, in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller’s tragic hero Willy Loman appears at the very beginning as someone who is tired of living, who has almost given up on life, who is talking to the ghosts of his past, who is losing his grip on reality. It is easier for him to talk to the ghosts of his past than to those who surround him in reality. When his son Bif does try to finally speak to him, to explain that he is just an average man, his father refuses to listen to him and suffers a physical breakdown. He is unable to confront this final disappointment, and refuses to acknowledge what he hears, all the while thinking his son is motivated by spite. Only at the very end does he, for just one moment, accept that his son does truly love him and with the very next breath, mutters the words that in Bif’s ears sound like a prison sentence: “That boy – that boy is going to be magnificent!”

Thereby positioning his son once again in an impossible situation rather than seeing how things really stand. Could the ghosts Willy Loman sees in 1949 be possibly related to the Neapolitan ghosts Pasquale Lojacono sees three years earlier in

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**Questi fantasmi!** (1946)? Is the vision of ghosts a condemnation of the past or merely a way for the poor man to cope with life’s hardships? Eduardo wants the audience to acknowledge its responsibilities for the past when he has Pasquale, the anti-hero at the end of his rope, yell to Professor Santanna (the off stage neighbor who really represents the audience): “I fantasmi non esistono, li abbiamo creati noi, siamo noi i fantasmi…” (*Fantasmi*, Atto II, p. 173).

This is a new and stark form of human drama, one where the anti-hero is defined by his poverty. He has nothing to lose, except the illusion that things will get better, but he can lose even that. Pasquale Lojacono touches on this when he confesses to what he imagines to be a ghost (but in reality is his wife’s lover) how hard it is for an unemployed man to feel worthy. “Se tu sapessi quanto è triste, per un uomo, nascondere la propria umiliazione con una risata, una barzelletta. […] E tu capisci che nun tengo ’o curaggio ’e ce ’o ddicere… perchè il coraggio te lo dà il danaro… e senza danaro, si diventa timidi, paurosi… senza danaro si diventa carogna!” (*Fantasmi*, Atto III, p. 181).

Miller tries to counterbalance this heartless, unrelenting drive for success with love, and here, in particular, love between father and son. That the protagonist becomes aware of this love only at the very end of the play helps to justify the tragic outcome. In a similar way, in *Natale in casa Cupiello* (1934), we find Luca Cupiello, Eduardo’s first real anti-hero, a Gugliemo Speranza at his most innocent state. Cupiello is a childish Pulcinella who lives in his own world where the only thing that matters is to build a beautiful nativity scene for Christmas. And though his family structure (a microcosm for society as a whole) is crumbling around him, the dramatist allows him to leave this life thinking (or choosing to believe) that everything is as it should be. Luca Cupiello asks repeatedly, almost obsessively, during the entire play whether his son likes his nativity scene only to get a negative answer.

**LUCA** [...] Te piace, eh?
**TOMMASINO** No.
**LUCA** [...] Come si può dire: “Non mi piace,” se quello non è finito ancora?
**TOMMASINO** Ma pure quando è finito non mi piace (*Natale*, Atto I, p. 369).
On his deathbed, however, he does get to hear his son, Tommasino, or as he is fond of calling him Nennillo, utter the words he has been desperate to hear: that he does like the nativity scene made by his father. This yes, in Luca’s mind, finally validates Luca’s own life and role as father, so too does Willy get validation from his son at the very end, and Arthur Miller sounds like he is describing Luca Cupiello when he writes:

Willy Loman is filled with a joy, however broken-hearted, as he approaches his end. […] He has achieved a very powerful piece of knowledge, which is that he is loved by his son and has been embraced by him and forgiven. In this he is given his existence, so to speak—his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve.⁶

Both De Filippo and Miller’s protagonists are optimistic: Luca never loses his illusion and Willy gets his back. In contrast, the only positive relationship in Gli esami (emphasized in the death scene) is that between Guglielmo and his audience as it is made privy to his feigned state of death:

[…] si diverte, si sente al centro di un gioco talmente infantile da farglielo ritenere uno dei doni più assurdi e affascinanti che la fantasia bizzarra dell’umanità abbia concesso all’uomo. Infatti, a quanti egli incontra sul suo cammino, dispensa sorrisi, ammiccamenti e frivoli salutini (Gli esami, Atto III, p. 597).

O’Neill, Miller and De Filippo are playwrights profoundly concerned with realistic portrayals without ever seeming to feel the burden of it. As he grew in stature as an autore as well as attore, Eduardo created characters who were psychologically more complex.

De Filippo appears to subscribe to Miller’s assertion that, “it is necessary, if one is to reflect reality, not only to depict why a man does what he does, or why he nearly didn’t do it, but why he cannot simply walk away and say to hell with it.”⁷ The turning point for Miller comes when, “that moment of commitment be brought forth, that moment when, in my eyes, a man differentiates himself from every other man, that moment when out of

⁶ Miller, Introduction, p. 34.
⁷ Miller, Introduction, p. 7.
a sky full of stars he fixes on one star […] the less capable a man is of walking away from the central conflict of the play, the closer he approaches a tragic existence.”

This justification for man’s existence is what Eduardo ultimately searches for and notwithstanding the esami placed on him by an unforgiving society, he must never give up. Even when resorting to silence, as he has Gugliemo do, he remains conscious of the fact that he has not surrendered his basic, human integrity in seeking this goal. In the following passage from Gli esami, De Filippo reveals a psychological transition of the protagonist and the manner in which the actor must convey it:

(...) il solo nome di Bonaria gli attraversa le vene come olio d’oliva su una ferita ancora sanguinante; il suo volto si distende, diventa luminoso, gli occhi gli risplendono di fiera, diventano teneri dopo lunga pausa) (Gli esami, Atto II, p. 573).

In achieving pure realism, the three playwrights realized early on how important it was to let the characters speak for themselves, or in Miller’s words,

[...] to let wonder rise up like a mist, a gas, a vapor from the gradual and remorseless crush of factual and psychological conflict. I went back to the great book of wonder, The Brothers Karamazov, and I found what suddenly I felt must be true of it: that if one reads its most colourful, breathtaking, wonderful pages, one finds the thickest concentration of hard facts.

Where psychological realism is designed to make the characters as real and as present as possible in the audience’s world, visual realism is designed to transport the viewer into the world of fiction. Eduardo too never fails to supply us with a plethora of detailed stage directions describing characters and their surroundings that must be translated onto the stage. Just as the whiskey and morphine being consumed by the actors in Long Day’s Journey can almost be tasted, so too can the smell of freshly made espresso or the ragù sauce in Sabato, domenica e lunedì (1959), be imagined by the audience. In a Neapolitan context, De Filippo uses detailed stage directions so that gestures and motions are as vital and important as words. Similarly he uses direct, dramatic language and sets the scene in closed and domestic quarters such as the kitchen. All these vital details make up the realistic content of the plays, but if this content crossed over into reality (and the sauce,

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8 Miller, Introduction, p. 7.
9 Miller, Introduction, p. 15.
for example, were truly smelled by the audience), it would destroy the illusion. An indepth stage direction, like the following, reinforces the concept that in spite of De Filippo’s aspirations of being known as autore, this last play is still very much a commedia dell’attore; one where the audience will expect any subsequent Guglielmo Speranza to act as well as Eduardo himself.

(The black velvet curtain opens revealing the living room of the Speranza’s apartment. GUGLIELMO is still stretched out on an armchair, head propped up on pillows; the room is in utter and unusual disorder: there are piles of books and newspapers strewn on the floor around GUGLIELMO.)

(During the next scene, all GUGLIELMO’s relatives that we will see coming in, will appear tired and overcome by that mental and moral fatigue which is typical of those who for too long have been forced to take turns by the bed of a seriously ill relative who has no hope of recovery. Trepidation and apprehension can be felt through the traffic in the rooms of the apartment and the living room; from the kitchen, the noise of running water in the sink and plates being stacked, the loud crack of plates falling and breaking; from the other rooms, the sound of quick steps and of doors being slammed. From time to time, members of the family, including GIGLIOLA and the MAID, hurry across the living room, one with a pile of just pressed laundry, one with a fresh pillow case to put on the pillow where GUGLIELMO has been resting his head. The two women take care of that replacement, however so hastily that in performing the task GUGLIELMO’s head falls now on the right now on the left. It is now GIGLIOLA’s turn; she is searching through a pile of medications on a table next to GUGLIELMO, finds a bottle of pills, which has to be of a color not easily mistaken, opens it, takes out three pills – exactly three – and puts them in the mouth of her husband helping him to swallow them with a glass of water. This gesture, which the woman carries out habitually and almost without thinking, and the difficulty the man has in swallowing, cause the water to overflow and run down the chin, the throat and into the collar of the nightgown, now much too large for that long suffering neck. GIGLIOLA however does not notice it and continues to pour water without paying attention to the twisting of the man when the cold liquid goes down on his chest and stomach. Having fulfilled her duty, with complete indifference GIGLIOLA puts the bottle back with the other medicines, places the glass still with water in it next to them and quickly goes into the kitchen. From the opposite side comes ROSA. She nears the table, selects the same bottle just used by GIGLIOLA, picks up the glass with the remaining water, and for GUGLIELMO the torture of the three pills, the water and the twisting is repeated. Completed her inopportune task, ROSA exits taking with her the empty glass.)
(Other members of the family going and coming, doing things not too different than what has just been described or that can be invented by the director keeping in mind that, generally, what one does for seriously ill people is dictated more by the desire to do something than by true thoughtfulness towards the person. A ring at the door...) (Gli esami, Atto III, p. 579-580).

Death of a Salesman, Long Day’s Journey and De Filippo’s neorealist dramas are all accurate portrayals of the realities of their time since their tragedy is often a consequence of the characters’ attempt to escape the bleak reality they inhabit, whether by taking drugs, consuming alcohol or speaking to ghosts. That world and its bleakness by necessity are depicted in their minutest detail.

Their sense of society and of the individual within that society is often the reason underlying the evolution of the characters or the entire course of action. As society undergoes change and turmoil (whether the war and depression in America or the post-war feeling of euphoria and consequent let down during the reconstruction phase in Italy), so too do the characters evolve. Because of its direct rapport with society, the behavior within the family is often a direct reflection of or reaction to what is happening outside.

In O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey, all four members of the family resort to drinking or drugs to escape facing reality, but it is in their escape that they are at their most lucid and can see the ugly truth and more importantly reveal it to each other. It is in a drunken haze that the youngest son, Edmund, blames his father for his mother’s drug addiction, but then hears his father’s side and feels for him, perhaps for the very first time.

In Death of a Salesman, the bitter sting of reality appears in the form of Bif’s painful discovery of his father’s infidelity and consequently the father of his imagination, that notion he adores, is destroyed. His disappointment and let down are so great that they become both the reason and the excuse for his low self-esteem. The characters in these plays are often forced to use illusion as an alternative means of escape.
The illusion of worldly goods

These playwrights all echo the Oedipal theme of a son’s sense of rivalry, even hatred for their father. Whether it is because the father has lost touch with reality, as in the case of Luca Cupiello, consumed by his obsession with the construction of the nativity scene or whether it is caused by the intolerable pressure placed on them by their parent’s expectations. These delusions of grandeur instigated by the parents do not prepare the children for reality and this explains the subsequent hatred. This escape to delusion is a disease that belongs to most of American society not just to the Loman or Tyrone family.

Many of Eduardo De Filippo’s characters are driven by the illusion that money will bring them happiness, and that the acquisition and retention of wealth is of supreme importance. For Eduardo’s characters this is an expectation placed on them by family. Guglielmo’s future father-in-law, Girolamo Fortezza, explains that he delays the wedding between his daughter Gigliola with Guglielmo, to enable him to attain a position thanks to his university degree. “Il tempo necessario per vedere quali saranno i frutti che riuscirete a raccogliere con quel pezzo di carta che vi hanno dato” (Gli esami, Atto I, p. 537).

By the time he writes Gli esami he is only too aware of how even the marital bond has degenerated into a business venture. As journalist Aggeo Savioli notes, “Negli Esami la moglie di Guglielmo Speranza ‘sequestra’ il coniuge, col ricatto dei figli, della rispettabilità, e così via, rovinandogli l’esistenza. Qui, del resto, il legame matrimoniale (o patrimoniale) è rappresentato in tutta chiarezza come un’unione di interessi […].”

And when explaining why he chooses to translate Shakespeare’s Tempest, De Filippo, deplores once again this rampant materialism which has turned the possession of money into a value:

[...] ci sono tante altre ragioni che mi hanno fatto preferire La Tempesta ad altre splendide comedie scerspiriane [...] e una delle più importanti è la tolleranza, la benevolenza che pervade tutta la storia: sebbene sia stato trattato in modo indegno da suo fratello, dal Re di Napoli e da Sebastiano, Prospero non cerca la vendetta bensì il loro pentimento. Quale insegnamento più attuale avrebbe potuto dare un artista all’uomo di oggi, che in nome di una religione o di un “ideale” ammazza e commette crudeltà inaudite, in una escalation che chissà dove lo porterà? E preciso che tra gli “ideali” ci metto anche il danaro, la ricchezza,

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Thus the very American preoccupation with material wealth, a strong component in O’Neill’s and Miller’s plays, clearly becomes a more relevant topic toward the end of De Filippo’s writing career and along with it the feelings of worthlessness, resentment and angst as he explores the intricate theme of the family, in order to paint a better picture of the society as a whole.

**Descent into pessimism**

Though O’Neill’s misery and gloom touch a rock bottom, a depth, where De Filippo and Miller rarely venture, all three playwrights require performances that reproduce with absolute realism the dialogue and the gestures of their characters. Eduardo manages to take this a step further since he is in the unique position of being both actor and author, and can draw on the technical heritage of the *commedia dell’arte*.

If O’Neill is truly the most American of dramatists, so too then Eduardo De Filippo is the most Italian of dramatists: his being from Naples reflecting more a state of mind than a geographic limitation. But while O’Neill cannot be said to be a celebrator of the American life, De Filippo always seems to offer some hope and usually in the third act the protagonist has the task of illustrating for the other characters a way out.

In his later plays, however, this no longer holds true and in *Gli esami* the “friend” and advisor, Furio La Spina, proves to be Speranza’s betrayer at every point in his life. Since the basic story had already been outlined in detail in the early fifties, De Filippo’s descent into pessimism was present much earlier than what is commonly thought. The basic plot for *Gli esami* had already been described to the journalist Raul Radice as early on as 1953:

La commedia in diciotto quadri narra la vita di un ragazzo dal momento in cui festeggia il conseguimento della propria laurea, fino alla morte che lo coglierà molti anni dopo. Tutta la sua vicenda è un esame: prima da parte dei futuri suoceri, poi della moglie, degli amici di casa, dei figli, dei conoscenti (c’è anche “un esame del cornuto”), infine del medico e del

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While at times the strong preoccupation with reality and with the effect of outside factors proves to be a flaw common to all three of these playwrights, their greatest strength without a doubt lies in the dramatic representation of illusion and despair and in the portrayal of the self-destructive weakness of man.

Part of that strength comes from the extent to which all three draw on their own life experiences as subject matter. While O’Neill acknowledges the autobiographical basis of *Long Day’s Journey*, Eduardo steers clear of straight autobiography (or, better, refuses to acknowledge it as such), and instead uses a fervid imagination in inventing a myriad of scenarios and smaller plays within larger ones. While Eduardo is telling what he knows to be true, it isn’t always what he has lived through himself. In those plays in which he is accused of Pirandellismo, such as *La grande magia*, he moves into the realm of the fantastic and away from realism almost altogether.

**Confession and self-examination**

The opportunity and need to confess one’s sins is in many ways paradoxical: it recognizes reality while allowing escape from it. During confession one becomes truly aware and conscious of one’s sin, and though the hope for redemption may remain an illusion, this exercise in self-awareness has somehow served the purpose of enlightening us, consequently distancing us from our sins, hence the escape.

An interesting similarity between the characters of these playwrights is the way they are forced to make their terrible confessions especially evident in O’Neill’s masterpiece, *Long Day’s Journey*. These confessions are made not to priests but to fellow sinners and thereby have no real hope of absolution, at least from a Catholic point of view.

Even De Filippo’s rejection of the organized religion of the Catholic Church discussed in Chapter 3 does not relieve his characters of the desperate need to confess their sins within the family, that microcosm of society. This escapism under the guise of

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confession is often the force that moves the characters. In *Long Day’s Journey*, Jamie confesses his jealousy for his brother and resentment toward his father. At the end of *Napoli milionaria!* Amalia recognizes her sins of blackmarket and profiteering to Gennaro and Alberto, in *Le voci di dentro*, states, after hearing paradoxically the many accusations within the same family of a murder, that we are all guilty.


The main difference, however, is that in O’Neill, confession seems merely an obligatory stop on the way to certain death, whether by suicide, alcohol or drugs; instead, in De Filippo, this open confession, which usually occurs at the climax of the play, is a positive thing which brings about the redemption of the character.

In the final scene of *Napoli milionaria!* Gennaro confesses to his wife Amalia that had he not left for the war he might have also fallen prey to the temptations of blackmarketing, “Che t’aggia di’? Si stevo ccà, forse perdevo ’a capa pur’io […]. E io aggio capito che aggi’ ’a stà ccà. Cchiù ’a famiglia se sta perdenno e cchiù ’o pate ha da piglià ’a responsabilità. […] Mo avimm’aspettà, Amà…. S’ha da aspettà. Comme ha ditto ’o dottore? Deve passare la nottata” (*Napoli mil.*, Atto III, p. 96).

What is truly most negative in De Filippo takes place when there is no confession, such as *Gli esami*, when Gugliemo is forced to wait for death in silence without the hope of being understood. The confession he had promised in 1953 isn’t there. In fact, the priest, totally rejected by Speranza who refuses to speak to him and much less confess to any crime, isn’t perturbed: “Bravo, sorridi e non parlare. È tutto quello che puoi fare, fratello. Non parlare, faccio tutto io” (*Gli esami*, Atto III, p. 594). Guglielmo’s withdrawal from life and growing silence is De Filippo’s way of conveying his own descent into pessimism. Because man, according to Guglielmo/Eduardo, deep down knows that, “non può ritardare la morte, è vero, ma sa con certezza che quando comincia a vivere come un albero, quando passa le giornate sdraiato in poltrona a leggere libri e
giornali, la fine non può essere lontana. Di libri e di giornali si può morire” (*Gli esami*, Atto II, p. 574).

In the plays of both the American dramatists and De Filippo, the characters come to terms with their inner emotions, and as they do so they encounter ghosts past, present and future. Pasquale Lojacono speaks to ghosts which are not ghosts at all, Mary Tyrone speaks to the ghosts of her past summoned up in her drug like stupor and Willy Loman is seen at the outset muttering to his own ghosts from the past, “literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present.” And Gugliemo is forced to escape into silence.

**Family drama**

The unmitigated reality of *Napoli milionaria!*, the ‘stammering eloquence’ of Filumena, and the helplessness of Pasquale Lojacono, perhaps all owe something to O’Neill’s relentless realism. Both De Filippo and Miller are affected and alarmed by what they see as the family tragedy in the twentieth century but they cannot reach the depths of nightmarish reality depicted by O’Neill. The harrowing realism of the subject that matters most to our three playwrights, the family life, is at its bleakest in O’Neill. As the critic Harold Bloom writes:

> It is a terrifying distinction that O’Neill earns, and more decisively in *Long Day’s Journey* than anywhere else. He is the elegist of the Freudian ‘family romance,’ of the domestic tragedy of which we all die daily, a little bit at a time. The helplessness of family love to sustain, let alone heal, the wounds of marriage, of parenthood and sonship, have never been so remorselessly and so pathetically portrayed, and with a force of gesture too painful ever to be forgotten by any of us.”

For these dramatists, the family is the microcosm of society and recounting its story is merely another way of recounting the human tragedy or the tragic state of man; and by doing so, we gain a small degree of understanding not just of those around us but of ourselves and what moves us: an attempt to gain insight into the philosophy of existence. And in this light, it becomes clear that the masks, the stage devices, the parables are all an

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integral part of such a task. In those plays where parable is being used, or where there is no color, no ragù sauce to smell or distract, is where Eduardo De Filippo is at his most creative and where his philosophy inquiry is most obvious. As Eduardo, the playwright, attempts the existential task of solving the many equations of life, he is finally free to dramatize the struggle of the poet, the poor man, and the underdog against the materialism of society.

And while both O’Neill and Miller investigate the destructive power of the American ideal and De Filippo condemns the materialism exacerbated by the post-war disillusionment in Italy, there are no social or political manifestos being written. The unifying theme for the three playwrights remains primarily: the writing of family dramas and how social factors affect them. The watershed moment in these dramas is often represented by the reconciliation between father and son. In Long Day’s Journey, this occurs at the very end of the play when the son Edmund (O’Neill’s alter-ego) discovers that his father was once young and full of dreams that he was forced to give up in exchange for financial security. This revelation dramatically changes his entire perception of his father and consequently his understanding of him.

TYRONE I’ve never admitted this to anyone before…. That God-damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in – a great money success – it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune. I didn’t want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I’d become a slave to the damned thing and did try other plays, it was too late. They had identified me with that one part, and didn’t want me in anything else…. I could have been a great Shakespearean actor, if I’d kept on. I know that!…. What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth – Well, no matter. It’s a late day for regrets. (He glances vaguely at his cards)…

EDMUND (Moved, stares at his father with understanding-slowly) I’m glad you’ve told me this, Papa. I know you a lot better now (Journey, Act III, pp. 131-132).

So, too, in the play Death of a Salesman, this key reconciliatory scene between father and son comes at the end.

BIFF Pop! I’m a dime a dozen, and so are you!
Willy (Turning on him now in an uncontrollable outburst) I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!

(Biff starts for Willy, but is blocked by Happy. In his fury, Biff seems on the verge of attacking his father.)

Biff I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash-can like all the rest of them!… I’m not bringing home any prizes any more, and you’re going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!

Willy (Directly to Biff) You vengeful, spiteful mut!

(Biff breaks from Happy. Willy, in fright, starts up the stairs. Biff grabs him.)

Biff (At the peak of his fury) Pop, I’m nothing! I’m nothing, Pop. Can’t you understand that? There’s no spite in it any more. I’m just what I am, that’s all.

(Biff’s fury has spent itself, and he breaks down, sobbing, holding on to Willy, who dumbly fumbles for Biff’s face.)

Willy (Astonished) What’re you doing? What’re you doing? (To Linda) Why is he crying?

Biff (Crying, broken) Will you let me go, for Christ’s sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? (Struggling to contain himself, he pulls away and moves to the stairs.) I’ll go in the morning. Put him—put him to bed.

(Exhausted, Biff moves up the stairs to his room.)

Willy (After a long pause, astonished, elevated): Isn’t that - isn’t that remarkable? Biff – he likes me! (Death of a Salesman, Act II, pp. 105-106).

In the very last scene of Natale in casa Cupiello De Filippo sets up a similar reconciliation between his possibly most touching and memorable character, Luca Cupiello, and his son Tommasino.

Luca […] (Ora Luca delirante farfuglia qualcosa di incomprensibile, agitando lentamente il braccio destro come per afferrare qualcosa in aria. È soddisfatto. Vaga con lo sguardo e chiude) Tommasi, Tommasi…

Tommasino (Sprofondato nel suo dolore si avvicina al padre, mormorando appena) Sto qua.
LUCA (Mostra al figlio il braccio inerte; lo solleva con l’altra mano e lo fa cadere pesantemente come per dimostrare l’invalidità dell’arto. Poi chiede supplichevole) Tommasi, te piace ’o Presebbio?

TOMMASINO (Superando il nodo di pianto che gli stringe la gola, riesce solamente a dire) Si (Natale, Atto III, p. 412).

The father dies content after his son Tommasino (lying, just in order to please his dying father), finally agrees that he likes his father’s nativity scene and, by doing so, validates his father’s existence.

And while the quick and confrontational dialogues within the family context of Long Day’s Journey and Death of a Salesman are most similar in style to De Filippo’s so-called family plays, the gloom and pessimism are best reflected in his later, existential dramas such as Gli esami. It is in these later plays that he forgoes their style and embraces their philosophy incorporating it into his own.

On the importance of stage direction: the reader and the actor

To achieve the maximum effect, Eduardo De Filippo and his American contemporaries, Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neill, are masters in exploiting the powers of the stage direction. As is the case in ancient drama, the text contains the structure of the scene and the written words are visual metaphors. De Filippo’s text, combined with the efforts of the director, designer, and actors, can bring us down into the dark and damp basso napoletano to sip a cup of espresso coffee or smell onions wilting in a ragù sauce in a spiritually lost post-war Naples.

In the final scene of Natale in casa Cupiello, De Filippo’s detailed prescriptions were:

Ottenuto il sospirato ‘si’, Luca disperde lo sguardo lontano, come per inseguire una visione incantevole: un Presepe grande come il mondo, sul quale scorge il brulichio festoso di uomini veri, ma piccoli piccoli, che si danno un da fare incredibile per giungere in fretta alla capanna, dove un vero asinello e una vera mucca, piccoli anch’essi come gli uomini, stanno riscaldando con i loro fiati un Gesù Bambino grande grande che palpita e piange, come piangerebbe un qualunque neonato piccolo piccolo... (Natale, Atto III, p. 302).
The stage direction here has a dual purpose: it is in part descriptive of what Eduardo did himself, and in part prescriptive so that subsequent performances by other actors can be as much like De Filippo as possible. The stage direction is what the director of the actor has to transform into something that is visible on stage. And since naturally the audience doesn’t get to see the stage direction, the meaning has to be transmitted through the performance.

The weight of Luca Cupiello’s last look bears down on every member of the audience as they walk away from the theatre. It is the understanding and mastery of the power of stage direction that really bind these playwrights together. Just as they are all three similarly criticized for attempting to over-intellectualize, or over-reach with their plays (an attempt that goes hand in hand with their growing pessimism and disillusionment) likewise there is no argument about their powerful scenic stagings. There can be no doubt as to their total mastery in stage representation.

And while their dramatic art is considerable it does make one revise any preconceived notions of just how strictly literary (“alla lettera”) an art drama necessarily has to be. De Filippo, who was in the unique position of also acting in his plays, was an expert at exploiting gestures to supplement words, but O’Neill and Miller, who were not actors, had to rely completely on language and staging.

Eduardo’s genius as an actor and improvisor often helped him overcome any literary limitations present in the text; he often revised editions of his work and in doing so stressed the importance of the performance for the final text, because only on stage and with the participation of the audience could the work be considered final.

But, unlike Miller and De Filippo, O’Neill did not leave written testimony as to what he was trying to say in Long Day’s Journey or even his own acknowledgement on the importance of the silent actions taking place on stage. The only thing we do have is the unfulfilled request to his wife Carlotta that she should not let the play be published until 25 years after his death. She disregarded his promise and published it after only three years, in 1956. In his dedication to her in the manuscript, O’Neill reiterates the autobiographical nature of the play: “For Carlotta, on our 12th Wedding Anniversary.
Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood.”

On the power of language without words Miller and De Filippo in some way are both indebted to O’Neill. To better illustrate this point I will examine the final scene in *Long Day’s Journey*, from which I will quote a rather long passage to best show how the dramatic power comes not from what Tyrone and Mary are actually saying but from what they are doing, spelled out in the playwright’s incredibly powerful stage directions.

TYRONE  *(Trying to shake off his hopeless stupor)* Oh, we’re fools to pay any attention. It’s the damned poison. But I’ve never known her to drown herself in it as deep as this. *(Gruffly)* Pass me that bottle, Jamie. And stop reciting that damned morbid poetry. I won’t have it in my house!

*(Jamie pushes the bottle toward him. He pours a drink without disarranging the wedding gown he holds carefully over his other arm and on his lap, and shoves the bottle back. Jamie pours his and passes the bottle to Edmund, who, in turn, pours one. Tyrone lifts his glass and his sons follow suit mechanically, but before they can drink Mary speaks and they slowly lower their drinks to the table, forgetting them.)*

MARY  *(Staring dreamily before her. Her face looks extraordinarily youthful and innocent. The shyly eager, trusting smile is on her lips as she talks aloud to herself)* I had a talk with Mother Elizabeth. She is so sweet and good. A saint on earth…. You can’t keep any secrets from her. You couldn’t deceive her, even if you were mean enough to want to. *(She gives a little rebellious toss of her head— with girlish pique)* All the same, I don’t think she was so understanding this time. I told her I wanted to be a nun…. After I left her, I felt all mixed up, so I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me so long as I never lost my faith in her. *(She pauses and a look of growing uneasiness comes over her face. She passes a hand over her forehead as if brushing cobwebs from her brain— vaguely)* That was in the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time. *(She stares before her in a sad dream. Tyrone stirs in his chair. Edmund and Jamie remain motionless)* *(Journey, Act III, pp. 154-156).*

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The grim picture of the three Tyrone men simultaneously lowering their drinks in silence as they listen mesmerized to their mother speak in her morphine stupor is more eloquent than words could ever be. Another memorable scene in which gesture, movement, and tone play a key role in moving the spectator is that between Edmund, the fictionalised O’Neill, and his mother.

**MARY** But I’m quite all right, dear. *(With a quick, strange, calculating, almost sly glance at him)* Except I naturally feel tired and nervous this morning, after such a bad night. I really ought to go upstairs and lie down until lunch-time and take a nap. *(He gives her an instinctive look of suspicion – then, ashamed of himself, looks quickly away. She hurries on nervously)* What are you going to do? Read here? … *(She stops, looking straight at him now. He avoids her eyes. There is a tense pause. Then she speaks jeeringly)* Or are you afraid to trust me alone?

**EDMUND** *(Tormentedly)* No! Can’t you stop talking like that? I think you ought to take a nap. *(He goes to the screen door – forcing a joking tone)* I’ll go down and help Jamie bear up. I love to lie in the shade and watch him work.

*(He forces a laugh in which she makes herself join. Then he goes out on the porch and disappears down the steps. Her first reaction is one of relief. She appears to relax. She sinks down in one of the wicker armchairs at rear of table and leans her head back, closing her eyes. But suddenly she grows terribly tense again. Her eyes open and she strains forward, seized by a fit of nervous panic. She begins a desperate battle with herself. Her long fingers, warped and knotted by rheumatism, drum on the arms of the chair, driven by an insistent life of their own, without her consent)* *(Journey, Act I, pp. 42-43)*.

Dramatic genius is most evident in O’Neill’s stage directions which are often intended as a device to make the text readable and literary for those who have no chance to see the play. It is a form of narrative genius that affords total visualization and both De Filippo and Miller will attempt with difficulty to equal the repressed intensities of his characters, that realism in speech, that “stammering native eloquence of the fog people” *(Journey, Act III, p. 135)*. The non-standard language of the Neapolitan dialect, at times, for De Filippo, serves this same purpose, not only of assuring genuine realism but of conveying an intensity of emotion that would lose a great deal in translation. By translation, I intend here into Italian and not into a foreign language. Because Eduardo De Filippo feared at
times that his huge popularity as actor of his plays would weaken his standing as an author, his primary reason for writing detailed stage directions was most likely to assure, especially in his later works, that the plays could sustain themselves, even without his presence on stage.

In the last scene from *Long Day’s Journey* quoted above, where the three men stop drinking with their cups in the air to listen to the final speech of their mother, the meaning of the play is perceived from what is happening on stage and not what from what is being said.

The emotion felt by the characters, structured by the author into the lines they deliver, is conveyed by the actors. The contrast between melodramatic and plain-speaking words is employed to add emotional pitch and realistic slant (for example, the dialect of Filumena as opposed to the correct Italian spoken by Domenico’s new fiancée Diana). Even the contradictions between what the character is saying and what they are actually thinking is demonstrated by gestures on stage. (For example, Mary’s coquettish behavior is in stark contrast to her confessions of wanting to be a nun.) For the playwrights, inherent in the written play is the performance, but only as understood and constructed by them.

The reason their stage directions are so meticulous is that these three playwrights never lose sight of the momentous significance of what is taking place on stage. As they write, they are constantly asking questions they figure the audience will be asking of themselves during the performance as the actors walks in. The social background is therefore fundamental in their own understanding of the actions or inactions by the actors. The hopes and fears of the spectator are vital in their appreciation of the characters’ quandaries on stage.

The public, in De Filippo’s mind, is just another character and he often uses methods which underline this belief. In *Gli esami*, the prologue is used as a device in which he clarifies, through the mouth of the character/author, how the story will unfold and in *Questi fantasmi!* the protagonist, Pasquale Lojacono, speaks to Professor Santanna, who really represents the audience. Guglielmo knows he is in a play, and colludes with the public against the other characters; Calogero Di Spelta in *La grande magia* plays extensively with real and imaginary audiences; Santanna is an audience of
one, located in the same place “across the road” as the real theatrical audience. These are three different ways De Filippo plays with theatrical fiction.

The ultimate goal shared and hoped for by these three playwrights is for there to be an epiphany experienced by the audience. They are trying to reveal a hidden truth to the spectator which he, the spectator, isn’t even aware of not knowing yet. Their task, could therefore be inferred as one of awareness-making; striking a chord, as it were, in the hearts and in the minds of the audience.

This role was strongly felt by De Filippo who, through the voices of his characters, was pleading directly to the people in power for social change, as he explained in an interview to Vito Pandolfi in 1956:

Da Napoli milionario! fino alle Voci di dentro c’è un linguaggio preciso. Se legge tutte quelle commedie in ordine, lei trova che c’è una coerenza…. Ricorda che in Napoli milionario! si chiude il sipario su Gennaro che dice: S’ha da aspettà, Amà. Ha da passà ’a nuttata. Dopo ho scritto Filumena Marturano…. I tre figli di Filumena Marturano rappresentano le tre forze dell’Italia: l’operaio, il commerciante, lo scrittore. “’E figlie so chille che se teneno ‘mbraccia, quanno sò piccerille…. Ma quanno so’ gruosse, quanno song’uommene, o so’ figlie tutte quante, o sò nemice.” Pensavo, con quella commedia, di aver messo in evidenza questa situazione ai governanti, pensavo che avrebbero preso dei provvedimenti. […] ma le cose rimasero stazionarie e allora ho scritto Le voci di dentro, dove il personaggio non parla più perché è inutile parlare quando nessuno ascolta.16

Eduardo’s disillusionment is a result of his being ignored notwithstanding the revelatory and enlightening nature of his plays. Like De Filippo, Miller too had felt that each of his plays, “was begun in the belief that it was unveiling a truth already known but unrecognised as such.”17

One may express disbelief at a play such as Long Day’s Journey being considered the best play in more than two centuries. In the same way, one may question the value and staying power of De Filippo’s plays. Perhaps, the reason for this is the feeling that their work doesn’t measure up to other literary forms. If this is so, then one must ask why the plays by these men have obtained such popularity. Is it not because they have struck a chord with the reader? The fortunes of Filumena Marturano have been followed for years by faithful fans, throughout Italy, Russia, Greece etc. who have identified with her plight.

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17 Miller, Introduction, p. 11.
This ability to present characters in such a realistic form that we, the audience can so easily relate to and be moved time and again to tears, then is the real legacy they leave us. As could be best summed up by the critic, Lionel Trilling, “We do not read Sophocles or Aeschylus for the right answer; we read them for the force with which they represent life and attack its moral complexity.”

**On the power of laughter**

The realization that we are destroyed by futile hope far more than we are by the torment of total despair is really at the heart of the interpretation of tragedy. Futile hope may be a form of hubris, but surely it is the despair on recognizing its futility that leads to tragedy. This is clear in *Questi fantasmi!*, although it is the hope and more importantly, the will to believe, however misplaced it may be (as is the case in Eduardo’s *La grande magia*), that can save us.

In Eduardo De Filippo, what seems at first comical is often tragic, as for example *Questi fantasmi!* “Parlando di tragedia, io non penso affatto che, per esempio, la commedia *Questi fantasmi!* sia una commedia comica. Ho sempre detto che era una tragedia ed è la tragedia moderna.”

It is a modern tragedy because the classic heroes no longer exist, instead, the anti-hero subsists in an ethical vacuum, without vengeful gods, which characterizes the post-war period. While the tragic hero was destroyed by gods, we are purged. And regardless of how strong the Pirandellian undertone of the ghosts in the play, in reality, it is those sins committed in our past which we can’t let go of and which influence us. Santayana remarked ruefully that those who cannot remember the past are committed to repeat it; perhaps a more optimistic outlook than Eduardo who already in 1946 with this play was saying that man is to blame for terrible sins of the past (fascism, the atrocities of war…) but that even more disturbing was his inertia and inability to free himself from these ghosts.

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I fantasmi, chi sono? Sono quelli che vivono questa nostra vita, sono i fantasmi del passato che vengono agli occhi alterati di Pasquale Lojacono e sembrano fantasmi. […] Siamo noi che consolidiamo e portiamo avanti a passo lentissimo le leggi più anacronistiche e più distruttive della terra. Questo è il significato dei fantasmi.  

And the moral lesson conveyed through comedy can be very powerful. In fact, when the spectator can identify with the ridiculous situation being played out on stage he will share in the ridicule. In De Filippo’s words, “l’umorismo è una lama molto più affilata e tanto più puntuta che non la tragedia. L’umorismo picchia proprio e va assorbito dall’umanità.”

De Filippo’s localized regional sense of humour sets him apart from the unremitting grimness of Miller and O’Neill as he places his characters in that particular Neapolitan setting where mindframes have been conditioned over the years by superstition, the lotto and fate.

Regardless of the stark realism of the surroundings depicted, these playwrights are all primarily concerned with basic existential themes: the nature of man, the meaning of life and the inexorable passing of time. As Miller comments:

That I have and had not the slightest interest in the selling profession is probably unbelievable to most people […] and when asked what Willy was selling, what was in his bags, I could only reply, ‘Himself’. The play grew from simple images. From a little frame house on a street of little frame houses, which had once been loud with the noise of growing boys, and then was empty and silent and finally occupied by strangers. […] It grew from images of futility – the cavernous Sunday afternoons polishing the car. Where is that car now? […] A need for immortality, and by admitting it, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one’s name on a cake of ice on a hot July day.

The existential queries raised in the plays are not meant by the authors to depress or cause angst but to awaken the spectator, to provoke a reaction and help him seek some sort of insight into our reason for existing. Eduardo may place the blame for Gugliemo’s silence on society’s duplicity but he also assigns the responsibility of filling in the words for the spectators. In order for Gugliemo’s message to be conveyed then there must necessarily be a response from the audience; the need for a dialectic process is implicit.

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20 De Filippo, Lezioni, pp. 68-69.
21 De Filippo, Lezioni, p. 15.
22 Miller, Introduction, p. 29.
Regarding the overwhelming sense of depression felt by most audience after seeing *Death of a Salesman*, Miller claims to have been surprised. “I did not realize while writing the play that so many people in the world do not see as clearly, or would not admit, as I thought they must, how futile most lives are; I did not realize either how few would be impressed by the fact that this man is actually a very brave spirit who cannot settle for half but must pursue his dream of himself to the end.”

The playwrights are presenting an existential perspective by attempting to give meaning to our existence which in itself is a positive effort and helps convey a sense of hope even in their darkest play. “As I watched and saw tears in the eyes of the audience, I felt a certain embarrassment at having, as I thought then, convinced so many people that life was not worth living – for so the play was widely interpreted […] I am convinced the play is not a document of pessimism, a philosophy in which I do not believe.” And it is interesting that both Miller and De Filippo claim they themselves are not pessimists, though their writings often are.

In De Filippo’s plays the bitter truth, that “parte amara della risata,” is always most poignant and best reached when it is filtered through laughter. On the contrary, laughter doesn’t seem to play a central role in O’Neill or Miller. When O’Neill, has Jamie Tyrone quote a verse from Rossetti’s *Willowood* sonnets, he brings the existential angst present not just in his work but in that of all three of these realist playwrights to the fore:

> Look into my face. My name is Might-Have-Been;  
> I am also called No More, Too Late, Farewell.  

Gugliemo (Eduardo’s alter ego) is the ultimate fatalist who looks back to how different his life might have turned out had he lived in a different neighborhood or fallen in love with a different girl.

> Troppo tardi, ho conosciuto la “profumiera.” Se per miracolo, da studente, me ne fossi andato ad abitare sopra ai Miracoli, e se miracolosamente la “profumiera” fosse venuta al mondo in tempo debito per incontrarsi con me, da coetanea, là sopra, voi oggi, invece di

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23 Miller, *Introduction*, p. 34.  
esse due figli nati da un gioco come quello delle parole incrociate, sareste stati due miracoli. [...] Mi trovate insolito, stravagante, al limite della follia? Sognatore, forse, si (Gli esami, Atto II, p. 574).

As with O’Neill, De Filippo’s spiritual and existential despair comes with the growing realization expressed in his later plays but felt much earlier, of the futility of single individuals when confronted with the universe of death.

**Shakespeare’s Tempest: a playwright’s epilogue**

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, there is a third and unequivocal influence on Eduardo. As a young man De Filippo read widely and readily admitted: “prima di ogni altro autore scelsi naturalmente il primo della classe: Gugliemo Shakespeare.”

Gugliemo is, of course, how Eduardo names the protagonist of his very last play, Gli esami, a manifesto of disillusionment and despair were it not for the last name of Gugliemo: Speranza. In this tiny, subtle way Eduardo is conveying a certain degree of optimism at the very end. He took that one step further when given the free choice of any work by his editor Einaudi. DeFilippo chose to translate into seventeenth century Neapolitan Shakespeare’s utopian tale *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare.

De Filippo, revealed his intention in an interview one year before his death, “Ho recentemente accettato di tradurre in napoletano una commedia di Shakespeare per l’editore Einaudi. Ho scelto *La tempesta*, non solo perché c’è lo spirito magico e favolistico partenopeo, ma anche perché Alonso e il figlio Ferdinando sono tipiche figure dell’antica Napoli.”

The choice of this particular work, done at the age of 83, becomes especially relevant since it turns out to be his very last work and culmination in a long artistic and philosophic itinerary.

*The Tempest* thus, intentionally or not, becomes Eduardo’s epilogue, a source of light in the dark of doom; an exciting coincidence is that the protagonist of the Shakespearean play, Prospero, also appears in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey*. That these two playwrights, famous for their final descent into pessimism and disillusionment, in the end share a passion for Shakespeare and in particular for what was

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26 De Filippo, *Lezioni*, p. 81.
Shakespeare’s own epilogue and farewell to theatre, certainly solicits attention. In the end it is Prospero, the protagonist of *The Tempest* who does not seek revenge but only sincere remorse in his antagonists, to ultimately offer the gleam of hope and optimism which at times appears nonexistent in Eduardo’s grimmest work *Gli esami*.

In explaining his reasons for choosing to translate this particular play by Shakespeare, Eduardo inadvertently reveals much about his own philosophy and ultimately reinforces my thesis that his work is much deeper and more complex than he has generally been given credit for and that his widely perceived view of his pessimistic outlook on life and humanity is actually not totally devoid of hope, “Ci sono tante altre ragioni che mi hanno fatto preferire *La Tempesta* […], e una delle più importanti è la tolleranza, la benevolenza […]. Quale insegnamento più attuale avrebbe potuto dare un’artista all’uomo di oggi…?”

In what is generally viewed as his own autobiographical epilogue, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, O’Neill has his characters debate Prospero’s famous words on the nature of life:

**TYRONE** Devil take your pessimism… Why can’t you remember Shakespeare and forget the third-raters? You’ll find what you’re trying to say in him – as you’ll find everything else worth saying. (*He quotes, using his fine voice*) “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”

**EDMUND** (Ironical) Fine! That’s beautiful. But I wasn’t trying to say that. We are such stuff as manure is made on, so let’s drink up and forget it. That’s more my idea (*Journey*, Act III, p. 114).

When his father afterwards praises Edmund’s poetical abilities, his son comes back with the bitter retort:

**EDMUND** (Sardonically) The makings of a poet. No, I’m afraid I’m like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn’t even got the makings. He’s got only the habit. I couldn’t touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. That’s the best I’ll ever do. I mean, if I

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29 Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4.1. 156
live. Well, it will be faithful realism, at least. Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people (*Journey*, Act III, p. 135).

This is the author and poet O’Neill referring to himself but expressing the unspoken fear of all three playwrights of not being understood and here, just as in the third acts of most De Filippo plays, it is the final speech once again to reflect the true thoughts of the playwright.

In *Gli esami*, in place of a *Tempest*-like epilogue, there is a complex prologue in which the figure standing before the audience is both the character Gugliemo Speranza and the actor performing the part.

**GUGLIE MO** Pubblico rispettabile, signore e signori: il protagonista della commedia che ascolterete stasera si chiama Gugliemo Speranza. Non vi stupirete, spero, se questo personaggio che io stesso farò vivere al centro della vicenda e che accompagnerò dalla giovinezza fino alla vecchiaia, non cambierà mai di abito: non può, non deve. L’ho chiesto all’autore e lui mi ha risposto: “L’eroe di questa commedia non è un tipo, bensì il prototipo di noi tutti, un eroe la cui esistenza è caratterizzata dagli aspetti positivi e negativi della nostra stessa esistenza…”(*Gli esami*, Prologo, p. 523).

And so De Filippo’s very last work (*Gli esami* was his last play but *La tempesta in napoletano* was his last literary effort), turns out to be a translation into Neapolitan of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. Coincidentally, his epilogue and true farewell to theatre, is the same as Shakespeare’s, also *The Tempest*. With these considerations in mind, it is clear that when tracing De Filippo’s philosophical journey from farce through neorealism to existential query, Eduardo’s choice of *The Tempest* becomes significant and, in particular, the translation of Prospero/Shakespeare’s epilogue takes on new meaning as he uses Prospero as the optimistic alter ego balancing his more pessimistic and silent character Gugliemo Speranza/Eduardo De Filippo.

The many factors explored and presented in this chapter which lead us to believe that Eduardo was indeed influenced by his American contemporaries O’Neill and Miller and, along with them, this final consideration regarding *The Tempest* poses an intriguing conjecture. It may be just a coincidence but I like to think of it as a homage to one of his
less acknowledged mentors, a homage De Filippo shares with O’Neill who also quotes
Prospero when writing his most memorable work. Both O’Neill and De Filippo echo
Shakespeare’s sense of vulnerability in front of an audience and the subsequent power of
applause. By recalling Shakespeare’s romance of reconciliation and Christian tale of
forgiveness these two modern playwrights may be extending a prayer for mutual charity
and understanding. And so in the words of Prospero:

Li incanteseme mieje songhe fermute, chellu ppoco de forza ca me rummane è propeta la
mia, nun sulamente è poca ma purzine debule assaje. Mône da vuje dipenne si aggio da
rummanere ccâne cunfinato […], nun me facite l’obbligo, cu la magia vosta, a restareme
sperduto ncopp’a st’isola sulagna. […] Cumme a vuje piace d’essere cundunate da li
peccate, assusine ve piacesse con indulgenza liberare mene.30

Chapter 5

Eduardo’s Last Play: Manifesto of Despair or Legacy of Hope?

“L’ultima volontà di Gugliemo non è stata rispettata:
l’hanno vestito.”¹

For De Filippo, what mattered most in the conflict between individual and society was the will of the individual to rebel against empty values and social conventions; a resolve to fight worth more than the outcome of the fight. This chapter will examine how his last and most introspective play, *Gli esami non finiscono mai*, in spite of its overt pessimism, wants to express hope in what future generations can bring. One year before his death, Eduardo reiterates this optimistic expectation in youth and in its potential to innovate without losing sight of tradition,

Il punto di arrivo dell’uomo è il suo arrivo nel mondo, la sua nascita, mentre il punto di partenza è la morte che, oltre a rappresentare la sua partenza dal mondo, va a costituire un punto di partenza per i giovani. […] Dunque, questi miliardi di punti di partenza, che miliardi di esseri umani, morendo, lasciano sulla terra, sono la vita che continua. La vita che continua è la tradizione. Se un giovane sa adoperare la tradizione nel modo giusto, essa può dargli le ali.²

In an artistic career spanning over fifty years, Eduardo De Filippo, captured the essence of Italian life both before and after the Second World War. He never forgot the terrible image first glimpsed at as a young boy at the *Corte Minorili* of the powerless individual struggling to be heard in an institution in which he had no significance (see Introduction) and so, from the stage, De Filippo tried to portray this battle even when the individual was reduced to silence like Guglielmo Speranza. Though Eduardo’s final work, *Gli esami non finiscono mai* (1973), is seen by many as a declaration of despair, the author’s assertion of the right to fight, even when there is no possibility of erasing the hypocrisy

of the society around him, ultimately demonstrated that he was not a complete pessimist. In his last portrayal of that perpetual conflict between man and society, Eduardo wished to impart a small degree of hope, if only under the ironic guise of Guglielmo’s last name, Speranza. This last DeFilippian character is absolutely alone in his optimism. Even when he has lost hope for all those around him, he still has faith in himself and in his perceptions of those around him.

As Eduardo’s wife Isabella De Filippo explained to me shortly before her death, Gli esami non finiscono mai is the play that provides the most meaningful insight in Eduardo’s philosophy: “per Eduardo questa commedia rappresentava la somma di tutto quello che aveva scritto sulla condizione umana,” and, as Eduardo himself admitted to journalist Roberto de Monticelli in 1980, on his eightieth birthday, this play was the greatest departure from anything written before: “la commedia nella quale ho rotto con me stesso.”

Eduardo’s nihilistic existentialism resulting from his discovery of the hypocrisy in society leads him to create the character of Speranza through whom he plays out his understanding of the individual and society. “Famiglia e società sono i due poli intorno ai quali ruota anche questa amarissima commedia. […] Una commedia che è specchio non tanto di misantropia quanto di angoscia d’essere tutta la vita un oggetto da vivisezionare per mera curiosità e indiscrezione da parte di una famiglia sbagliata e una società corrosiva.”

This realization and the need for a reaction provide Eduardo with the opportunity to understand and define himself. For him, the family is a war zone and society is a battleground where the individual must struggle and prevail. As early as 1945, Eduardo explained the need for social awareness, even in the staging of his own plays. Between the first and second act of his play Napoli milionaria! he told the audience:

Ogni anno di guerra, signore e signori, ha contato come un secolo della nostra vita di prima. Davvero non è il caso di tornare a quelle vecchie storie. La commedia di stasera ha un primo atto che si riallaccia a quel genere: le conseguenze della guerra viste attraverso la

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3 Isabella De Filippo, telephone conversation with author, 5 December 2004.
lente della farsa. [...] Insomma, era finita La cantata dei giorni pari e cominciava La cantata dei giorni dispari. I giorni pari erano quelli che credevamo sereni. Li credevamo, bada, era un’illusione.¹⁶

The responsibility for waging this social struggle, after being struck by personal enlightenment, belongs to Eduardo’s anti-hero: a common man, who rather than succumb to bleak reality creates an imaginary world made up of ghosts, like Pasquale Lojacono in Questi fantasmi!, or a paradoxical one in which his wife is closed in a tiny box, like Calogero di Spelta in La grande magia, or one in which the protagonist can witness his own death, like Guglielmo Speranza in Gli esami (for full discussion of these plays see Chapter 3).

In a 1974 interview with Corrado Augias, Eduardo explained the underlying reasons for the pessimism and disillusionment of Gli esami:

Probabilmente è stata la vita. [...] Quindi o vent’anni fa si poteva ancora supporre, sperare, che dallo sfacelo generale si sarebbe salvata la famiglia, oggi quella speranza non c’è più. Ma se il personaggio di Gennaro Iovine rappresenta la categoria dei poveri, degli sbandati, dei diseredati, se insomma rappresenta una categoria particolare, il personaggio di Guglielmo Speranza, nel mio ultimo testo, allude allo sbandamento nostro totale, di tutti, e non ci sono più parole che possano esprimerlo un momento come questo, nonostante che il fondo non sia ancora stato toccato, secondo me.⁷

With Gli esami, Eduardo wanted to put forward a cheerless and weighty work that would sum up his vision of Guglielmo’s desperate sense of being left alone, “di quel suo stravolto modo di sentirsi improvvisamente escluso ed estraneo.”⁸ Gli esami helps us unravel the mystery of his thought process: from the stage the author initiates a conversation on life and on the human condition with the spectator. In the caustic monologue that Eduardo (as Speranza) carries on with the audience on happiness, faith, desire, death and love, life’s supreme issues come to the fore as the dramatist/actor holds out his hand to the spectators before him.

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¹⁶ De Filippo, interview by De Monticelli, Corriere della Sera, 24 May 1984.
The influence of Pirandello

When representing the individual’s struggle against society, De Filippo often places his protagonists in absurd scenarios (in *Gli esami* the protagonist speaks directly to the audience even winking at it during his own funeral), from which he can more easily delve into the dark recesses of his characters and sharpen his and our existential awareness. Eduardo credited Pirandello for helping him do this and he felt that the powerful influence exercised on him by the Sicilian playwright was in part due to the strong underlying roots that unite Sicily with Naples.

De Filippo and Pirandello, two of the most important Italian dramatists of the twenty-first century, share some of the same concerns: they both explore the themes of madness and identity. For both the unattainability of happiness and the feeling that family is hell are recurring topics, although for Pirandello silence is very important while Eduardo relies more heavily on words and gesture.

In addition to shared qualities, there are fundamental differences between the theatre of these two major playwrights, Pirandello was operating in an intellectual, author-centered milieu while De Filippo operated in a pragmatic actor-centered milieu. For Pirandello, reality is illusion: everybody wears a mask, and nobody exists for himself; while for De Filippo you can in the end be yourself and you can rebel. Pirandello tends to represent his ideas through a *raisonneur*, a character aloof from the action who comments on what is happening; in De Filippo, all the focus is on the central character created by Eduardo in his own image, and it is he who provides the commentary on his own situation. According to De Filippo, however, the main difference, was that Pirandello’s theatre was concerned with finding reasons while his, was mainly concerned about the mundane struggles of daily life. “Pirandello ha influenzato tutti […] ma diverso è il modo di esprimersi. Il suo è un teatro delle ragioni. Il mio è un teatro delle cose quotidiane, dei fatti. Davanti ai fatti, cioè davanti ai problemi concreti, pratici, d’una società che non regge, che crolla.”

Some of the analogies between the plays by Eduardo (*Questi fantasmi! La grande magia* and *Le voci di dentro*) and those by Pirandello (*Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* and *Enrico IV*) have been explored in Chapter 3 especially in regard to the theme of

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faking madness within a dysfunctional family. Along with the plays, it is useful to take a look at one of Pirandello’s most famous works, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904), regarded by many as the first truly absurd classic of modern literature. The novel represents the psychological odyssey of one man who rejects his life and, under a new name, attempts a new life. From this, he ultimately flees by faking a suicide in order to return to his old self. When critics found fault with the story for being outlandish and implausible, Pirandello retorted that it was actually based on a real case (this criticism naturally was besides the point since art should not be forced to be credible when life itself is full of absurdities). Many of De Filippo’s plots were also taken from newspaper stories, and Eduardo De Filippo, like Pirandello, agreed that to write about the absurdities inherent in life one need look no further than the everyday occurrences in life itself.

As the years passed and De Filippo’s disillusionment increased, the language used by his alter ego/protagonists became terser, until they reached like Guglielmo Speranza, the point of totally refusing to speak. Before Guglielmo, the protagonist often gained insight during the action of the play and, by the third act, having reached a higher plateau of understanding and consciousness, was given the task of enlightening the other characters on stage, thus reaching the audience. By the end of his artistic career however, Eduardo decided to eliminate this process by establishing direct communication between Guglielmo, his last protagonist, and the spectators. “Ogni tanto, nel corso dell’azione, io verrò qui a fare una chiacchieratina con voi, perchè possiate apprendere dalla bocca stessa di Guglielmo Speranza il suo pensiero intimo sui fatti accaduti e le previsioni su quelli che dovranno accadere” (*Gli esami*, Prologo, p. 523). And since the protagonists of his plays, and of this one in particular, are in part autobiographical, this was his way of conveying his message directly to the public. According to critic Ugo Buzzolan, with *Gli esami*, “il grande autore ha raggiunto il massimo punto di comunicazione diretta con il pubblico. […] Questi colloqui sono indimenticabili perchè la parola e la mimica dell’autore-interprete creano dal nulla una rappresentazione che sembra di vedere e di poter toccare con mano.”

But by having Guglielmo reject language at the end of the play, he highlights the futility of communicating with the other characters on stage and perhaps also Eduardo’s

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own sense of futility, at the end of a life based entirely on words and communication. Silence here is also perhaps related to the silences of absurdist drama (Godot), of neorealism (in reaction to the abuse of language by fascist rhetoric, and the inadequacy of language in the face of horror) and reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s legendary silence at the end of his life. Speranza’s silence is both ironic and mocking.

Similarly words only create pseudo-communication and pseudo-identity. As an individual set against a cruel and heedless society, man is constantly being tested; that is his moment of truth, when he, the ‘povero diavolo’ represented by Guglielmo Speranza must transcend his petty surroundings, his illusory reality and attempt a great leap of faith. As Pirandello wrote in his essay *L’Umorismo* (1908),

> In certi momenti di silenzio interiore, in cui l’anima nostra si spoglia di tutte le finzioni abituali, e gli occhi nostri diventano più acuti e più penetranti, noi vediamo noi stessi nella vita, e in sé stessa la vita, quasi una nudità arida, inquietante; ci sentiamo assalire da una strana impressione, come se, in un baleno, ci si chiarisse una realtà diversa da quella che normalmente percepiamo, una realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell’umana ragione.\(^{11}\)

De Filippo too felt the need to strip the reality perceived by his main character, in order to represent the bare truth hidden underneath and in this effort he acknowledged the impact of Pirandello who was always concerned with the ephemeral nature of our perception of reality. Pirandello’s philosophical and psychological conclusions are more self-alienating than Eduardo’s ever attempt to be; perhaps because Eduardo is often more self-conscious as an author and actor. Both are socially aware, but De Filippo has no intermediary between him and the spectator and he is therefore less artistically free than Pirandello.

Even though Eduardo had already conceived the story of *Gli esami* in 1953, he waited twenty years before committing it to paper. In a 1974 interview with journalist Giorgio Prosperi, he explained that he had needed to wait so long because he felt that the audience could not handle the play’s grim portrayal of the family or the vise-like grip of Italian society: “Il soggetto era pericoloso. Vi si rappresentava una famiglia senza tanti complimenti, in modo negativo, e allora la morale era ancora chiusa, i gusti non erano evoluti come adesso.” The fact that De Filippo felt he could finally perform the play in

1973 was a positive sign and a significant step: he hoped that the audience was ready to change: “Rifare sempre gli esami agli altri è un vizio dell’uomo. Vedi, un autore spera sempre che una sua commedia serva a qualche cosa.”

As Eduardo’s philosophy and his interpretation of the human tragedy develop in his plays, the absurd illusions of life created in plays such as *Questi fantasmi!* and *La grande magia* foreshadow the tragic illusion of death created by Guglielmo in *Gli esami*. At the end of a long career as playwright and actor, Eduardo De Filippo, expands on his understanding of comedy in his later plays and attempts to redefine comedy. It is not a theatrical genre where everything turns out all right in the end, but rather it goes further into paradox and humour.

When situations are paradoxical they defy rationalization; to attempt to rationalize would be to minimize the effect and meaning of the play. The viewer gets used to seeing the paradox and begins to look beyond, almost as though the absurdity had become a new reality, nothing out of the ordinary, an everyday event. This is when the expertise of the playwright comes into action. De Filippo never felt obliged to explain the baffling situations he presented on stage as Pirandello did. An element of magic and mystery was an essential ingredient of his plays.

Pirandello died in 1936 before the outbreak of the Second World War; Eduardo, on the other hand, lived to see that life often proved to be more improbable than art or fiction. With his most Pirandellian creation, Gugliemo Speranza, Eduardo reached the climax of the anomalous hero who, by forsaking the accepted form of language is able to communicate.

Eduardo like Pirandello has a penchant for making the spectator laugh, perhaps the cleverest way of all to make one swallow the bitter pill of self-awareness. Especially in performance, Pirandello is extraordinarily witty, but for the most part detached. His

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characters are amusing caricatures, his dialogue is pared back to clearly articulated essentials. In Eduardo, on the other hand, this comic ability is heightened by his use of dialect. (Even his later plays, written almost entirely in Italian, sometimes sound as if they were translated from Neapolitan.) De Filippo often writes about the absurd in coherent terms by using common expressions, humorous situations and recognizable characters and the use of dialect creates an illusion of familiar intimacy with the audience. He injects his play with small anecdotes and and almost trivial scenes from everyday life so that they are familiar to us.

**Pessimism or wary optimism?**

Eduardo was at times dismissed as a writer of light farces, but he recognized the complexity of the farce, its validity as a vehicle for serious social comment, and was able to inject that social comment without sacrificing humour. His play *Non ti pago*, for example, while seemingly dealing with a very lighthearted topic presents a social tragedy. In his own words:

La tragedia di oggi si scrive facendo ridere molto. [...] Vorrei farvi l’esempio di una commedia molto comica che secondo me è la più tragica che io abbia scritto e che ha un titolo terra terra, che può attirare la curiosità del pubblico, ma che non è pertinente alla drammaticità del caso. È *Non ti pago*. Un testardo che si è fissato in una sua idea; vuole vincere e non può riuscire perché ha torto marcio. Riesce a piegare l’opinione pubblica, riesce a piegare la famiglia e riesce a piegare persino il prete, la chiesa. In ultimo poi piega anche il suo avversario, lo piega con la superstizione, lo maledice. Questa è una delle commedie più tragiche del mio repertorio, eppure fa scoppiare il teatro di risate. [...] La tragedia moderna è quella che fa ridere, non con pagliacciate, con una comicità superficiale, epidermica, ma affondando il dito nella piaga, nel dramma comune, nella tragedia comune [...]. Il mio consiglio è di mantenervi in una chiave grottesca, di assurdo. Noi ridiamo di tutto in questo momento, perfino della morte.\(^{14}\)

De Filippo believed that the “freedom” to determine one’s own identity also implied an individual’s responsibility toward society. It is a sort of existential freedom that has little to do with the individual’s pursuit of profit, but rather, is founded on the recognition of a general obligation toward society. This freedom, and the responsibility it entails, is not something to take lightly; comfort is for those who are not forced to think, who let others make all decisions for them. In Eduardo, this freedom to change (unique to man), usually

\(^{14}\) De Filippo, *Lezioni*, p. 92.
belongs to only one character, the anti-hero, and even in *Napoli milionaria!,* his most neorealist drama, it is present in Gennaro Iovine who wishes to fight the strong temptation his family has of conforming, of going after the material riches which are slowly replacing the real values.

The metaphorical vehicles used by Eduardo to reveal the existential predicament of modern man are those used by other authors concerned with existential issues: the state of isolation and estrangement of the anti-hero, the breakdown of communication, and the theme of reconciliation and ultimate salvation, all of them, though, imbued with a special Neapolitan twist. Guglielmo Speranza, alienated from family and friends, is the ironic personification of hope in isolation and estrangement. Towards the end of Eduardo’s life, the theme of death takes on a more central role, which is no surprise since it is death that forces us to come to terms with our mortality. Yet in *Gli esami,* Eduardo finds a way to make Guglielmo transcend death. Perhaps De Filippo has unravelled the mystery of human existence, “In questa vita nessuno può mettere il punto: esiste soltanto il punto e virgola. Non possiamo illuderci, dobbiamo lasciare il posto agli altri.”

But De Filippo’s pessimism and disillusionment have more to do with unfulfilled promises and unrealized expectations than with death. Eduardo displayed his disappointment with society in different plays: the topic of illegitimate children (*Filumena Marturano, De Pretore Vincenzo*); the impossibility of divorce (*Questi fantasmi!, L’arte della commedia*); the family degenerating into a spurious and deceitful institution (*Mia famiglia, Il contratto, Gli esami non finiscono mai*), and social injustice (*Sindaco del rione Sanità*). “Insomma, il mio sogno di un mondo migliore è come un pallone in cui, anno per anno, si sono andati a infliare spilli in quantità, sgonfiandolo sempre più…. Rimangono i giovani, la vostra generazione, in cui sperare…. Speriamo bene!”

What moved Eduardo to overcome his deep disillusionment and pessimism was the option, the choice that always remained in the hands of the individual to stand up and struggle. This is the one positive element that propelled Eduardo’s journey from a state of despair to one of optimism and is at the basis of this last play, *Gli esami non finiscono*

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mai which, I would argue, encompasses “existential” themes, and in particular embraces a particular kind of individualistic optimism within a broad context of pessimism.

Guglielmo does not immediately appear to have exercised this option at any stage of his life: he has always been controlled by the external forces of family, work, community opinion, and has been constantly under examination. But at his death, when he realizes that he cannot make any changes to what is or has been, he can still choose to resort to silence: this is the conclusion of Eduardo. Even if it seems that he is conforming to the expectations of others (like the cuckold of La grande magia or the corpse in the funeral scene in Gli esami non finiscono mai) he can find a way of salvaging his own human dignity. This is never an easy task and usually comes at a considerable cost, whether it be creating a parallel reality or seeking refuge from present reality because De Filippo strongly believes that in addition to personal responsibility there is a social obligation at stake as well.

This feeling of an inherent accountability not only for ourselves but for all men results in the now-proverbial existential angst involving all of mankind. For Eduardo, conversely, society’s collective liability for the post-war moral vacuum contributed to his own sense of anguish and isolation. Consequently man must choose his actions carefully. As we see in his plays, the deeds of the individual affect not only his own life but also the lives of members of his family, the microcosm Eduardo most often uses to represent society at large. It is only through one’s behavior and through one’s accomplishment that the individual can give meaning to his existence. With this understanding, the Eduardian anti-hero places himself a step above the rest: he may seem on the outside, an outcast, or a loser, but he has a deeper understanding that comes from listening to his inner voices. This capacity of personal insight helps him transcend any apparent foolish state, even those around him, who are not privy to such enlightenment, will continue to mock him to the end. Guglielmo Speranza’s last words (see the end of Act Two) are meant to explain to his surprised children his intentions of giving up the petty trials of everyday life: “E per farmi piacere […] ho detto “farmi,” badate, non ho detto “farvi” […]. Per farmi piacere, me ne andrò al più presto all’altro mondo” (Gli esami, Atto I, p. 574).

Shortly before his real death in 1984, Eduardo expressed his original view on life and death by saying that birth is both a point of arrival and a finishing-line while death is
both a point of departure and a starting-line. In an ambiguous and inventive way, De Filippo is perhaps suggesting that death is not a departure for another life, but a launching point for the young who now have the opportunity to repeat the mistakes of the old. Life almost sounds like a very short stop on a railway journey.

This emphasis on departure rather than arrival was symbolic of his optimism in future generations. The pessimism, born from the realization of how life is presented to man, was counterbalanced by the optimism, and from the way man chooses to react to his own conditions.

The most bitter and pessimistic point of his theatre, what he regarded as the dress rehearsal of his own funeral, came at the end of Gli esami, in which reality and fiction collided. In the play, Gugliemo Speranza is forced to seek refuge in silence and ultimately death from the incessant exams and inquisitions his terrible relatives and society force on him. The audience watches a disillusioned man, dressed up in a ludicrous way (although he had requested to be buried naked), who somehow is interpreting the old lazzo from the commedia dell’arte tradition, the “finto morto” (see Chapter 2). Tradition and innovation, existential query and farce: Eduardo’s art has come full circle. Eduardo reveals the duplicity of society through a funeral eulogy and in an original game blurs the lines between life and death. Freed from the bonds of society, making him a witness of his own death, Guglielmo Speranza, in the words of the stage direction: “non avverte il senso di ridicolo che, da vivo, egli temeva gli sarebbe caduto addosso da morto, anzi si diverte, si sente al centro di un gioco talmente infantile da farglielo ritenere uno dei doni piú assurdi e affascinanti che la fantasia beffarda dell’umanità abbia concesso all’uomo” (Gli esami, Atto III, p. 597).

This scene, written by De Filippo in 1973, with its bizarre mix of pomposity and farce, was uncannily prophetic of what really happened at Eduardo’s own funeral in 1984 and exemplifies better than anything else his life-long struggle with officials and authorities. There was, according to Dario Fo’s recollection of it, a sudden interruption of the live coverage on television at the moment when a young boy from a Neapolitan prison was supposed to thank the playwright who had shown interest in his plight. He should have been followed by Dario Fo, who represented the teatranti but, as Fo bitterly

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17 De Filippo, Conferenza, Montalcino 1983.
remembered, that entire part of the filming was intentionally interrupted as a “vendetta dei politici che si erano visti esclusi dal rito.”\textsuperscript{18} And like Guglielmo who had witnessed his own funeral with amused detachment, Fo imagined that De Filippo was also watching his own funeral ceremony from the sky: “Allora io ho visto per aria Eduardo che si faceva matte risate. Era proprio il finale che lui voleva.”\textsuperscript{19}

**The disillusionment of Guglielmo Speranza**

In 1945, as Italy was besieged from the Fascists and Nazis, it found itself in the paradoxical position of gaining freedom only by losing the war. In May that year, in liberated Naples, De Filippo presented his neorealist drama *Napoli milionaria!* It would take De Filippo another thirty years to write *Gli esami* after realizing that it was not an external cause like war or poverty that were to blame for Italy’s ethical vacuum but the people themselves who were to be held accountable. In this play by De Filippo, as in so much post-war theatre, the existential angst of one individual, caused by the breakdown of communication within a family becomes symptomatic of a much larger crisis in society. It is from *Napoli milionaria!* onwards that De Filippo’s perspective shifts from man’s remediable alienation from society to man’s hopeless alienation from the outside and from himself, but only in *Gli esami* does De Filippo confront previously unexplored issues such as metaphysical anxiety, personal solitude, and moral ambiguity. Viewing the struggle between individual and society, Eduardo was no longer convinced of man’s ability to overcome social and spiritual maladies and his protagonist is left to grope alone for values to sustain his faith in himself and in a decadent society.

The most frightening realization is that human corruption, represented here by the treacherous “friend” Furio La Spina, is no longer the exception, a deviation caused by the bitter reality of the war, but has crept in slowly into our everyday lives until it is an almost unavoidable social behavior. The realization of this, more than anything else, seems to move Eduardo to delve deeper and deeper into the souls of his characters to uncover their motives, their thoughts and the reason behind their actions, and, finally, their strategies for survival. His growing pessimism did not preclude, however, the

\textsuperscript{18} Dario Fo, in *Eduardo De Filippo. Vita e opere 1900-1984*, p. 189.

\textsuperscript{19} Fo, p. 189.
possibility of personal redemption; he was disillusioned with mankind but always retained hope in the individual.

De Filippo’s existential belief in free will and the power of choice is illustrated by Guglielmo Speranza’s decision to not speak. However, unlike the characters of Eduardo’s neorealist plays, such as Gennaro Iovine, Amalia Iovine, Domenico Soriano or even his most famous Filumena Marturano (strong, mobile characters displayed as free beings who must choose their own destinies and are able to do so as their passion blends with the action of the play), Guglielmo’s free will is really put to the test as he is repeatedly forced into a corner and crushed under the weight of others. He chooses an apparent state of resignation and, in so doing, bares his soul to the non-caring scrutiny of humanity.

De Filippo wanted to show that nobody could consider themselves immune to what happens outside the tight family nucleus (fascism, war, etc.) but as members of a collective society we are all accountable. However, it is precisely this responsibility that causes the feeling of dread in man. The sense that we are what we make of ourselves and thereby the constant need to reaffirm our values and justify our lives. Man must create a reason for his existence.

For De Filippo, it is only in a confrontation between two entities that we can assert our freedom of will and, as he shows in numerous variations on his *maschera*, it is in the struggle of the individual against society that man defines himself. In the case of Guglielmo Speranza, the characters around him are unable to recognize or acknowledge the act of will. Among the many characters who are called to judge there are even those who conclude contemptuously that Guglielmo “Non ha saputo morire” (*Gli esami*, Atto III, p. 597). They impose on him a sort of slavery, an external identity against which he must battle in a desperate effort to regain freedom, but in so doing they also provide him with the opportunity for exercising his free will. This ultimately distinguishes Eduardo from Pirandello: Pirandello, accepted the imposition of external identity with a certain equanimity (for example, in *Così è (se vi pare)* (1917)), while Eduardo’s Guglielmo fights for his right to choose.

Gugliemo does this by recognizing at last the breakdown of communication with his wife, representative of the first link with society: “Il fatto è che ci perdiamo in divagazioni, ma non abbiamo mai avuto il coraggio di dirci in faccia la verità” (*Gli*
esami, Atto II, p. 564), subsequently by seeking refuge in silence (therefore refusing to participate in what is happening around him), and finally by achieving his freedom through the ability to witness his own funeral. This almost comic power baffles his “friend” Furio, who reads the ironic eulogy. In the words of the stage direction, “maladuguratamente, non appena decide di dare inizio al discorso, il suo sguardo ispirato incontra quello beffardo del “morto”; per un attimo ne rimane disorientato, ma poi si riprende e attacca” (Gli esami, Atto III, p. 595).

According to De Filippo, during that necessary struggle between man and society that gives our existence meaning, Guglielmo achieves his freedom by witnessing, and thereby transcending his own death.

De Filippo’s hero (or anti-hero as is more often the case, for full discussion see Chapter 4), must wrench himself from a state of passivity and act in accordance with De Filippo’s general rule of existence: that all the variants of his maschera in the end must hear and submit to their own conscience, even if the people around them have no conscience of their own. But Guglielmo Speranza, the tragic De Filippian anti-hero, must confront his own fate by rebelling against the men and the circumstances attempting to negate his being, in other words, he must fight to validate his own existence as a human being.

Thus, Gli esami, contains the essence of existentialist philosophy: the demand for the moral awakening to individual responsibility. Although De Filippo may seem pessimistic about Mankind as a whole, by acknowledging the potential for the individual to have this awakening, he remains optimistic about the single man. And even though De Filippo’s belief in human solidarity wanes towards the end of his life as his analyses of human relations become more and more bitter, his plays, even if at times very grim, are never given to total despair; some heroic action, some form of rebellion, some small degree of hope remains, even if it is only visible in a character’s last name. Guglielmo Speranza’s disillusionment is compounded by despair when he realizes that he is battling not only against society but also against the people who form his inner circle, his very family which has turned against him.

Eduardo’s optimism, however, is also manifested, as journalist Renzo Tian observed, in his willingness to communicate through his plays directly with the audience:
“Il diritto che Speranza reclama è quello di essere libero nelle scelte, sincero negli impulsi, fedele ai sentimenti…. Rimane il ricordo di un Eduardo con la mano tesa al di là della ribalta, come poche volte lo abbiamo visto: non più rinchiuso nei suoi eloquenti silenzi, ma proteso a parlare, a parlare con i suoi spettatori, nell’ansia di dir tutto fino in fondo....”

“Tutto imbrogliato dietro di me”

By the time Eduardo wrote "Gli esami," he had merged his theatrical know-how with his philosophy but he was not prepared to explain it. He believed that the only way to reach the audience was to reach out with one hand and wait patiently for them to grab it. “Tendi sempre una mano al pubblico, vedrai che lui te la stringerà nella tua destra. Non tendergli anche l’altra mano […] vedrai che sarà lui a tenderti la seconda.”

Nevertheless, just before he died, he did attempt an explanation of his mission as a playwright to a group of students in a university lecture: “Quante volte ho detto che il nostro lavoro non è egoistico ma altruistico? Pur sapendo che non c’è niente da fare, pur sapendo che le cose tornano ad essere quelle che sono, noi abbiamo il dovere di tentare di salvare l’avvenire, il futuro.” Despite his reputation as a pessimist and a misanthropist, he was a man who felt the social obligation to attempt change, even when knowing that change will not be forthcoming. And though he had his alter-ego Guglielmo seek refuge in silence and find a “way out” in the fiction of the stage, Eduardo continued to work until the very end thereby demonstrating a will to never give up hope in the strength of his words and always retain confidence in future generations. He remained confident that it was now the turn of youth to innovate without ever losing sight of tradition. In his 2004 lecture commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Eduardo De Filippo’s death, Giulio Andreotti reiterated this point, emphasizing Eduardo’s preoccupation with the young and hope in their ability to change things.

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21 Frascani, “Eduardo De Filippo attore,” p. 130.
22 De Filippo, in *Eduardo, polemiche, pensieri, pagine inedite*, p. 148.
23 De Filippo, *Lezioni*, p. 133.
But the playwright never set out a clear program for a new world nor did he ever leave any technical advice on acting:

Servono solo a imbrogliare le carte. Prenda il libro di Stanislavski sull’attore e sulla recitazione e guardi che fine ha fatto nelle mani dei “discepoli.” Stanislavski è importante per quello che ha fatto non per quello che ha lasciato scritto. Gli americani nelle scuole di recitazione che si richiamano a lui stanno uscendo pazzi per cercare di capire e di mettere in pratica i precetti che ha lasciato sulla pagina. Non hanno ancora capito che non sarà mai possibile. Guardassero la vita, invece.”

And in the end, Eduardo even declined to answer any questions (yet another exam?) about his own life, work, and philosophy. He explained to the interviewer in question, Federico Frascani, that he intentionally refused to leave an autobiography, feeling that the key to understanding his thoughts on life and art could be gleaned from his plays and above all, from his “summa” Gli esami. The element of mystery, so important in his plays, proved to be essential in his own life as well: “Tu fai la domanda, io rispondo. Così nasce un libro che poi altro non sarebbe che la contabilità di una vita, della mia vita…. Ma nemmeno per sogno! Quando me ne andrò, voglio lasciare tutto imbrogliato dietro di me.”

Gli esami non finiscono mai premiered on 19 December 1973 at Teatro La Pergola in Florence under the direction of the author, with a musical score by Roberto De Simone. Along with Eduardo, who played the part of Guglielmo Speranza, the other main actors included his son Luca (under the stage name Luca Della Porta) as Furio La Spina and his stepdaughter Angelica Ippolito as his wife Gigliola.

The play was favorably received, with most critics underlining his misanthropy and pessimism. The critic Renzo Tian compared Eduardo’s last character to “il misantropo Molieriano,” Mario Stefanile emphasized Eduardo’s view regarding the “nothingness of existence,” and found the play to be “amarissima forse al limite del nichilismo esistenziale che da sempre è il sangue più profondo della grande malinconia comica di

25 De Filippo to Augias, L’Espresso, 1 September 1974.
26 Frascani, “Eduardo De Filippo attore,” p. 130.
27 The play was then performed during the 1974 winter season at the Teatro Eliseo in Rome. The following year Gli esami was staged at the Teatro San Ferdinando in Naples on 26 January and the Teatro Eliseo on 12 March. In 1977, Gli esami was also staged at the Vachtangov Theatre in Moscow.
Eduardo,” while Aggeo Savioli saw a more optimistic side to Eduardo’s alter-ego: “l’autore-attore si distacca dal suo personaggio, non ne condivide la rinuncia, la fuga.”

The film version of the 1973 play *Gli esami non finiscono mai* was made in 1975 directed by De Filippo with the assistance of Anna Maria Campolonghi, with the original cast from the Florentine premiere, and screened on RAI DUE on 16 January 1976. The television version is slightly different from the written text (an almost natural case of artistic license considering De Filippo is not only the writer but also the director, actor, and *capocomico*). There are, in fact, many ad-libbed lines, much more slapstick humour, and exaggerated, unscripted grimaces that result in a more burlesque outcome. (For example, at the very beginning of the film, for example, Speranaza gives an improvised explanation to the audience of his decision not actually to wear the different colored beards but to simply attach them to his lapel with a pin: the reason is that he feels the abrupt changes would annoy the spectators. In another instance, when he is interrogated by his future father-in-law about whether the women he has supposedly cavorted with as a young man were *geishas*, he answers with amused surprise: “Geishas? In Italy.”)

According to critic Buzzolan this television recording is a memorable document of Eduardo’s art, “la sua faccia-maschera mai in primo piano eppure tagliente e incisiva e prepotente in ogni inquadratura e assieme un esempio di come si possa fare del teatro (grande teatro) in televisione senza perdere nulla dell’incanto e della magia del vero palcoscenico.”

The text of *Gli esami non finiscono mai* was published for the first time in 1973 in the Einaudi series, *Collezione di teatro*, and was reprinted with some textual modifications, again by Einaudi, in the third volume of the *Cantata dei giorni dispari* in 1979. Here certain scenes were eliminated, such as the conversations in dialect between the bartender and the students at the beginning of the play and a short dialogue in semi-dialect between Furio La Spina and the doorman. According to Anna Barsotti, who edited the volumes, because of the differences between the 1973 edition and the final one of 1979 “si può supporre che la prima versione del testo, finita di stampare il 15 dicembre 1973 e che reca l’indicazione ‘Isca, agosto 1973,’ non rispecchi eccezionalmente le

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soluzioni concretamente adottate nello spettacolo; le quali invece compaiono registrate dalla drammaturgia consuntiva dell’autore nell’edizione riveduta del 1979.”32

Subsequent editions contain no further changes. My translation is based on that text.

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Conclusion and Introduction to the Translation

Napule è nu paese curioso…¹

Figure 5. Eduardo during a coffee break. Reprinted from Santarelli, *Eduardo dietro le quinte*, copertina.

There has been a tendency amongst theatre critics, scholars, and audiences to view Eduardo De Filippo in a limited, albeit complimentary, manner. Many have been hesitant, in fact, to accept that his plays could survive or be successful without the help of his extraordinary stage presence. The problem with such a perspective is that it neglects the importance of the socio-political and artistic content of De Filippo’s work and fails to show how the dramatist reached a deeper plateau by the end of his life. While there is no doubt that Eduardo’s unique style of acting accounted for much of the success of his plays while he was alive, we have seen in this thesis that today, twenty years after his death, his work is still being performed to critical acclaim and appreciated by scholars of Italian literature.

This thesis has attempted to reveal Eduardo De Filippo as a much more complex playwright than is commonly acknowledged. It has done this by presenting the underlying causes behind his shift from the farces written during the twenties to the post-war neorealist plays up until his very last work, the existential *serio ludere* of *Gli esami non finiscono mai*. Since it is this last play that truly holds the key to understanding the shift it was essential to provide a translation in English of the play. For this reason, I consider the translation an integral part of the thesis.

*Gli esami non finiscono mai* follows a man during three phases of his life: youth, maturity, and old age (on stage these are differentiated simply by the three colors of a prop: the stick-on beard worn by the protagonist). Like Gennaro Iovine, the lead character, Guglielmo Speranza, is an anti-hero at odds with society; another mask worn by Eduardo, his last one and perhaps the most honest reflection on how he viewed things at the end of his life and artistic career.

On stage, we are presented with an ordinary man who must undergo one exam after another during his lifetime, from university exams, to those posed by his future father-in-law, from those suspicious scrutinies searching for a likeness between his babies and himself, to the final exams predicted by the priest, which are waiting for him after he has died. Even the speech at his funeral is more like an analysis under a microscope than a eulogy. (Later Eduardo will admit that he hoped this scene would discourage anyone from ever saying “parole di circostanza” at a funeral.)

Unlike Gennaro, the protagonist of *Napoli milionaria!*, Guglielmo is unable to react, much less enlighten anyone. The inertia and helplessness experienced by Guglielmo are similar to that of Eduardo making this work a most autobiographical and personal manifesto of disillusionment and futility. And, as Gugliemo ultimately seeks refuge in total silence, we realize by the end of the play, that man has moved backward instead of forward, and what was once an understandable human tragedy has become an inexcusable tragic condition.

The war is no longer the culprit but has been replaced by empty values and social conventions expressed through a barrage of useless questions. Eduardo claims at the end of his life that these *esami che non finiscono mai* are what has transformed our lives into a manmade hell. And since for Eduardo, theatre and social reform are closely woven
together, this retreat of Guglielmo into silence on stage helps fulfill his social obligation as a playwright by pointing out what is not right in society. “Il mio è finito col diventare un discorso profetico: nelle commedie ho trattato una verità che è diventata verosimile […] credo che in questo senso del futuro sia il compito dello scrittore.” De Filippo’s art has transcended amusement and become enlightenment and his final play, Gli esami non finiscono mai, represents the legacy he leaves us.

The translation

In 1956 the journalist Corrado Alvaro noted, “Se dovessimo cercare nel teatro italiano l’eroe di tutti i giorni, lo dovremmo indicare nel teatro di Eduardo. Se dovessimo indicare a stranieri un teatro che desse l’essenza della vita italiana dopo la guerra, nella finzione teatrale, indicheremmo Eduardo.” The problem remains, however, of how to translate into English the language of Eduardo that is quintessentially Neapolitan in its representation of those key markers of identity: dialect and gesture, food and family relationships.

The problem of translating Neapolitan dialect was one faced recently by the theatre critic and writer Michael Feingold, who in 2005 was commissioned by Theater for a New Audience to produce a translation of Questi fantasmi! (Souls of Naples). The actor John Turturro, who played Pasquale Lojacono, then adapted the translation for performance with Italo-American and Hispanic actors who performed in an authentic Italo-American dialect of English, with the occasional help of subtitles in Italian, to highlight expressions, sentences, and words that survived from the original. A large number of internet reviews make it clear that this production, praised both in New York and on tour in Naples, succeeded in finding a language that avoided the stereotypical caricatures of The Sopranos, and The Godfather, and forced the audience to meet the play on its own terms.

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4 Biagio Coscia, “John Turturro: che sfida fare Eduardo a Napoli,” Corriere della Sera, 15 January, 2006. Michael Feingold’s translation of Souls of Naples directed by Roman Paska was performed by John Turturro and by the Theatre for a New Audience Company at the Duke on 42nd St in New York City (14 April-8 May 2005), and recently at the Mercadante Theatre in Naples (24-29 January 2006).
Gli esami non finiscono mai does not present difficulties of dialect, since it is written almost entirely in standard Italian. It does however present extraordinary complexities of register and allusion.

The play opens in the 1920s, with Guglielmo Speranza, a hopeful young graduate on the threshold of life, ready to take up his duties as a man and as a member of society. The first name, Guglielmo, is the translation of Shakespeare’s first name, whom Eduardo referred to as Guglielmo, while the last name, Speranza, represents a gleam of hopefulness in what is otherwise an utterly bleak and dismal work.

In the prologue, an actor informs the audience that he will be interpreting Guglielmo Speranza’s life from the day of his university graduation until the day of his funeral. Three stick-on beards (black, gray, and white) will symbolize the different phases of his life. The period goes from the 1920s of his youth to the 1970s of his old age (mirroring De Filippo’s own age), and the scene and manners of the three acts evolves too, from bourgeois drawing room drama (early Pirandello, Noël Coward) in the first act, to gritty neorealist periphery café in the second, to surreal disconnection in the third. The songs in the play, performed by a street singer, are used to highlight the different periods and go from the popular operetta Addio Giovinezza (1911) to a hit from 1972 (that can be chosen freely by a future director). The many gags and lazzi employed by De Filippo, still reminiscent of his ties with the commedia dell’arte, are here both farcical and tragic.

Speranza is in love with Gigliola, daughter of the Fortezza’s (meaning a fortification, in the specific a symbol of their incomprehension) and, after his university graduation, he goes directly to her family to ask for her hand. He will be accepted only after careful scrutiny and a battery of exams.

He has two sons from this marriage, Felice and Fortunato, who (only in name) mean Happy and Lucky. Throughout his life he is plagued by his university “friend” Furio La Spina (his name Fury and Thorn) an evil spirit for Guglielmo who will prove to be the thorn in his side and the thread of disaster throughout his life. He will insist on being Guglielmo’s best man, on befriending his wife Gigliola, on leading her ultimately to the place of Guglielmo’s rendez-vous with Bonaria (meaning simple good-naturedness), the perfume girl that Guglielmo, exasperated by his own domestic situation, turns to for comfort. When finally Guglielmo can no longer bear the weight of this
bourgeois life of incrimination and deceit, he surrenders. In the silence of his armchair and his books, he shall find the ultimate refuge. In this withdrawal from life he lives out his remaining days. Eduardo’s Guglielmo is in a sense the perfect man in a totally imperfect world. Or perhaps, with his sadness and disillusionment, a totally imperfect man in a perfect world. He leaves it to us, his public, to unravel the “imbroglio” left behind.

The translation reproduces as far as possible the intentions of De Filippo’s written text of Gli esami non finiscono mai. As I have shown in my discussion of the television version of Gli esami, De Filippo’s own performance was not constrained by the words on the page, and he was free to adapt and improvise. The end-user of this text, the dramatist, director or actor, will necessarily adapt this translation to the circumstances of the performance.

Translation into English does not mean that Naples becomes England or New York or Little Italy on Lower East Side. That remains the responsibility of the actor/interpreter. The obligation of the translator is to represent with as little distortion as possible the intent of the original. To this end I have maintained all the original names and titles, even where they might have been translated, and I have preserved a formality of language that has been rejected by contemporary theatre. If there is betrayal in the translation, then it is in the hands of the performers to rectify and restore.

This last play truly provides the answer to why the Neapolitan dramatist’s focus shifted from the external factors present in his neorealist period to the inner, deeper ones present at the end. Reading and examining Gli esami is essential for understanding and fully appreciating the playwright Eduardo De Filippo.
Exams Never End

Gli esami non finiscono mai was first performed on 21 December 1973 at the Teatro La Pergola in Florence. The text of the play was first published by Einaudi in 1973 in the series “Collezioni di teatro,” and subsequently included in the third volume of the 1979 edition of Cantata dei giorni dispari. My translation is based on this edition.

Characters

GUGLIELMO SPERANZA
FURIO LA SPINA
BARMAN
ATTILIO, a student
AGOSTINO, a student
CORRADO, a student
FIRST STUDENT
SECOND STUDENT
THIRD STUDENT
STREET SINGER
GIROLAMO FORTEZZA
AMNERIS, his wife
GIGLIOLA, their daughter
STANISLAO, brother of Amneris
LAUDOMIA, the maid of the Fortezza family
PICIOLLA and CUCURULLO, Gigliola’s friends
BONARIA
TERESA, a local restaurant owner
FORTUNATO and FELICE, Guglielmo’s sons
VITTORINA and ROSA, their wives
GIACINTO CHIARASTELLA
MAID in Speranza household
VALENTINO, a private hairdresser
SAMPiero, a veterinarian
PROFESSOR NER0
PROFESSOR BIANCO
PROFESSOR ROSSO
COUNTESS FILIPPETTI ULLÈRA
DON CICCUZZA
FIRST LATECOMER
SECOND LATECOMER
MEMBERS OF THE WORKING CLASS and BOURGEOISIE and AGENTS
Prologue

In a dark theatre, the curtain rises as a ray of white light floods the center of a smaller black velvet curtain placed in the center of the stage. With rapid gestures and absolute mastery of his profession, **GUGLIELMO SPERANZA**, introduces himself to the audience. Opening wide the black velvet curtain he advances to the center front of the stage. He is wearing everyday clothes and is carrying in his left hand three false beards: one black, one gray, and one white. These three stick-on beards shall be like those used by the strolling comic players years ago of bygone days to allow very fast costume changes; they used to attach them to their faces with elastic and tough candy-pink tape. After the customary bow, the actor respectfully takes off his student beret with a long point at the front made from a piece of newspaper and begins his introductory speech.

**GUGLIELMO** Respectable members of the audience, ladies and gentleman: the protagonist of the play you will see tonight is called Guglielmo Speranza. I hope you will not be amazed if this character at the heart of the story and whom I will be interpreting and accompanying from his youth all the way to old age, will never change outfits: he can’t, he mustn’t. I’ve already questioned the author of the play about this matter and he explained to me that: “the hero of this play is not a ‘type’ but is rather the prototype of us all, a hero whose existence is characterized by the positive and negative aspects of our very existence, and it would therefore be impossible to find an outfit which could reflect his complex personality.” He emphasized further: “A symbol can be recognized for what he thinks and says, not for the outfit he wears.” And since the author didn't want to tire you with the tidy character who plays the sidekick, in the course of the action, I will come out here to have a little chat with you, so that you can hear from the mouth of Guglielmo Speranza himself his innermost thoughts on the events taking place and his predictions on what will happen next. In other words, you will be the sidekick. Guglielmo
Speranza graduates from university. We don’t really know what faculty he chose back then: as you can see, his student cap is made from a sheet of newspaper. The story begins around 1922-1923. The street singer... (He takes a step backwards, lifts the small black curtain in the center and lets the singer with a guitar pass through)... Here she is, as the years pass she will sing for you the biggest hits of the period. These three beards represent the passing of time: black for youth, gray for maturity, white for old age. Well here goes! (He sticks on the black beard.) I am twenty-five years old, I’ve just graduated. I live during that period of time some of you may recall today with nostalgia, the romantic days of “Farewell youth.”

**Singer**

(Singing while strumming the guitar)

But beauty vanishes,
Youth no longer returns,
Time spent without love
Will never return.... (She goes out.)

**Students**

(Offstage) Hurray for Naples, the city of beautiful women, we are the pillars, we are the pillars of university!

(At this the velvet curtain opens revealing Chance-meeting Street. In the meantime, the group has finally located Speranza. They stop singing to run and congratulate Guglielmo Speranza. The first to see him and to tell the others is his colleague Furio La Spina.)

**Furio**

(Offstage) There he is, there he is! Guglielmo!

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1 From Sandro Camasio and Nino Oxilio, *Addio giovinezza* (1911), a popular operetta about bohemian student life.
STUDENTS  (As above) Guglielmo!

FURIO  (As above) We’re all here!

ATTILIO  (As above) Nobody is missing!

GUGLIELMO  Come, friends, come!

AGOSTINO  It’s time to party, Gugliè!

CORRADO  Wine and ice-cream for everybody!

(The young men, led by FURIO and a young waiter who is carrying three flasks of wine, arrive boisterously on stage and surround GUGLIELMO.)

CORRADO  For Guglielmo who has graduated at the top of his class...  hip hip...

EVERYBODY  Hurray!

ATTILIO  Bottoms up!

FURIO  One moment. (Suddenly he assumes the attitude of a great medical scientist and begins examining suspiciously GUGLIELMO’s physical attributes) The vacant look, glassy eyes and almost petrified gaze of our colleague Speranza lead us to deduce the trauma he has suffered in the presence of the board of examiners, may its name ever be praised.
EVERYBODY Amen!

FURIO May he rest in peace, these are my words. That the trauma he has received, as I was saying, has shaken him so much that he is left a victim of not only diminished intellectual faculties but also of a sudden facial paralysis which impedes his speech and his ability to swallow? Who is his attending physician?

AGOSTINO It is I, illustrious professor: senior specialist at the “Badluckbrothers” Hospital, a specialist in internal, external with panoramic views, medicine, all diseases dealing with to hearts and piss pots. Valentino, Valentinissimo at your service.

FURIO (Respectfully) What about the family?

ATTILIO (Covering his head with a handkerchief and tying it under his chin) There’s just me, the mother, dear professor. His father died of fright when the midwife showed him the newborn baby. We’re simple people, but we do have money, lots of it. I’ll rip these pearls from my ears if you can save my baby who left his home in my very loins without paying back rent and even though nobody made him.

FURIO Are there any other children?

ATTILIO (Pointing to CORRADO) He’s the firstborn. He is so unbelievably smart that he has already figured out that when his brother dies, he’ll be better off because he can eat twice as much as what he eats now.

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2 Play of words on the name of the Fatebenefratelli Hospital, founded in Rome in 1584.
FURIO Did he do his exams?

AGOSTINO Certainly.

FURIO I would like to see them.

AGOSTINO Here they are. (Showing FURIO some scrap paper) Wasserman, urine, glycemia, azotemia.

FURIO And what about the sputum?

AGOSTINO In your hand, professor... the sputum’s there! (After a short pause, indicating the sheet FURIO is now looking at) Done and Number 2.

FURIO You did it?

AGOSTINO No, I didn’t do it, he did.

FURIO Who did it?

AGOSTINO He did it. Number 2, the faeces test.

FURIO Yes, of course, I see.

AGOSTINO And what about the prognosis? What do you think? What should we tell the mother?
Furio

*Toward Guglielmo* Stick out your tongue. *The students force Guglielmo to bend right over and show Furio his rear end; one of them, then pushes a hand between his legs so that it seems like a great wagging tongue* The thermometer! *A broom is placed under Guglielmo’s arm* The patient has a galloping fever. *Pretending to follow with a finger the mercury rising along the broom* It’s rising....

Everybody

It’s rising....

Furio

It’s rising....

Everybody

It’s rising....

Furio

The thermometer is going to burst! Take it out! *Sad and in a formal tone he speaks to the fake mother* Ma’am...

Attilio

Tell me, tell me, professor!

Furio

*Obitus imminens.*

Attilio

The lord be praised!

Furio

It’s a case of apoplectic hypersensitivity, which has caused the pendulant plenianalytic biscombobulism to deviate from the manalogical phrenicology and to turn into the opposite complex syndrome that requires a digestive laxative cackative psychorectilinear pharmacolotic to treat it. Now it’s up to him. *Repeated handshakes and hearty congratulations are exchanged among the “doctors.”*
CORRADO  

(Lifting up in the air a bottle of wine) For the degree gotten by the skin of his teeth by Guglielmo Speranza, hip hip...

EVERYBODY  

Hurray! (They drink from the bottle and pass it around.)

FURIO  

I’m really moved. You know how sincere I am, Guglielmo. Give me a brotherly hug. (The two embrace) We’ve been together through grade school and high school and university. We spent the happiest hours of our childhood together. You were always luckier with the girls and with your studies than me, I was always flunking and studying through summer to make up exams in autumn. There is no envy in me, I swear. And I declare loud and clear in front of all our colleagues, that I will be your guardian angel ready to give up my life for my best friend Guglielmo Speranza! (A long applause of agreement. “Hurray for Furio La Spina” follows.) Now, Guglielmo, it’s your turn to make a speech. (Encouraging shouts and a long applause.)

GUGLIELMO  

Dearest friends and classmates, the lighthearted days and blessed innocence of our youth are over... We graduate, by the skin of my teeth as Corrado just noted, in less than a fraction of a second, we undergo a metamorphosis: beyond our will, we feel an enormous weight of responsibility. You recall your father’s words: “My son, I will make any sacrifice so that you can study at university. Remember however that without that “piece of paper” for society you’re just firewood”. With a degree in my hand – I don't know why Papa referred to a degree as a piece of paper – with a degree in my hand, I was saying, I feel a new sense of responsibility, commitment, ambition. Soon I will get married. I promised my girlfriend ...
EVERYBODY To Gigliola!

GUGLIELMO Thank you. I promised her that I would ask to marry her as soon as I graduated: I will speak to her parents today.

EVERYBODY To the bride and groom!

GUGLIELMO Fellows, the exams are over! No more exams for me! (*He repeats this twice.*)

EVERYBODY To Guglielmo Speranza!

GUGLIELMO Farewell, friends.

FURIO Let’s go together.

GUGLIELMO No. I am going to see my beloved’s parents.

EVERYBODY Good luck!

GUGLIELMO Thanks. And thanks for the drinks.

FURIO No, you’re paying for the drinks.

GUGLIELMO (*To the BARMAN*) Put it on my bill. (*To the friends*) Bye again. I’ve got to run. (*He leaves in a rush.*)
BARMAN  Some one has to pay for the wine.

FURIO  Later. We’ll come and pay you in person. We’ll find you. Wait for us near the fountain.

BARMAN  Which fountain?

FURIO  The sick fountain.

BARMAN  A sick fountain?

CORRADO  Sea creature that lurks in warm waters? Mackerel? Haven’t you read Palazzeschi?³

FURIO  Walk straight ahead and you will hear the call of the sick fountain: plif... plif... plot... plaf, plaf, plif, plif, plif... They exit, as the curtain (small make-shift curtain in front) closes behind them.

³ Aldo Palazzeschi (1885-1974), La fontana malata (1911).
Act One

Slowly, the students’ chant moves away while from offstage strains from a guitar and the voice of a street singer can be heard. The song, a hit from 1922-1923, begins even before the sounds from the students dies away completely. The girl comes in from the wings opposite the ones through which the students departed, crosses the stage and goes out. Once she has disappeared, GUGLIELMO SPERANZA appears from one of the wings and crosses the stage very slowly. In his right hand, he is holding a bouquet of creamy pink roses, the color of angels’ cheeks; dangling from his little finger is a promising gift-wrapped packet of confectionery. There is a thin string around his neck attached to both ends of a cardboard tube containing the brand new degree he has just received.

When GUGLIELMO goes out through the wings opposite the ones through which he entered, the second curtain opens to reveal the drawing room of the Fortezza family. It’s a comfortable room, perhaps a little dark with heavy austere furniture, characteristic of a good bourgeois family in those years. A sense of tension can be felt among the Fortezza family members. DON GIROLAMO looks at his watch and snorts; STANISLAO meditatively paces the length and breadth of the room; AMNERIS fans herself while from time to time she adjusts a curl that has come out of place on GIGLIOLA’s head. The girl’s attitude makes it hard to tell whether she is a true simpleton or just pretending to be one in front of her parents. Off stage, the sound of an electric bell catches the attention and interest of the family and of the maid, LAUDOMIA, who, after a moment of confusion, rushes to the front door. The entire family sits down as a group, striking a pose in line with the morality, the style and the fashion of the period.

After a long pause the MAID returns announcing:
LAUDOMIA Mr Guglielmo Speranza is here.

GIROLAMO Show him in.

(LAUDOMIA exits.)

LAUDOMIA (Showing GUGLIELMO in) Please come in, sir.

(The young man enters making a rather clumsy half bow. The ceremony of introductions takes place among whispered words fit for the occasion, the serious reason for which the meeting is taking place and according to the mores of the time. The roses are for AMNERIS, the chocolates for GIGLIOLA... finally GIROLAMO commands the maid with an authoritative but kind voice)

GIROLAMO Laudomia.

LAUDOMIA You called?

GIROLAMO A chair for the gentleman and then leave us.

LAUDOMIA Yes sir. (She places a chair in front of GUGLIELMO.)

GIROLAMO Wait.

LAUDOMIA Yes?
GIROLAMO    Amneris?

AMNERIS    Girò? *(GIROLAMO leans over towards his wife and whispers something inaudible in her ear. Amneris having listened)* Yes. *(Towards the MAID)* Laudomia, bring the malvasía and biscuits.

LAUDOMIA    At once, madame. *(She goes out.)*

GIROLAMAO  *(To GUGLIELMO)* Now that you have met the parents, as well as my brother-in-law, Stanislao Porelli...

STANISLAO  Medical Internist, please don’t get up.

GIROLAMO    As I was saying: we would like to get to know you better. As a matter of fact, in the first place, we would like to know how, when, and where you and our darling Gigliola met each other.

*(LAUDOMIA returns with a tray full of glasses, the bottle of sherry and the biscuits. GIGLIOLA hurries to serve the wine and the biscuits. She hands her father the first glass, then her uncle the second. In the meantime, AMNERIS has taken care of GUGLIELMO, and is ready to receive the glass of malvasía and biscuits from GIGLIOLA.)*

GIGLIOLA    I only want a biscuit.

AMNERIS    *(To GUGLIELMO)* My daughter doesn’t drink.
(They converse while sipping the delicious wine and dipping the hard-baked biscuits into it.)

GIROLAMO  So how did you meet?

GUGLIELMO  Actually I couldn’t really say.

GIROLAMO  You couldn’t say how you met my daughter?

GUGLIELMO  Well, I don’t know whether Signorina Gigliola will permit me to tell.

AMNERIS  And what’s wrong with telling us? My daughter told me how it went immediately, what happened and what didn’t happen.

STANISLAO  I know it because my sister told me.

GIROLAMO  The only one who doesn’t know is me.

STANISLAO  Yes, the matter of the buttons.

GIGLIOLA  No, the button.

GIROLAMO  What button?

AMNERIS  I didn’t say anything to you, my dear Girolamo, because Gigliola didn’t want you to know for fear that you might disapprove, but now she’ll tell you herself and you’ll see that there has been no wrong
doing. As a matter of fact, you’ll be proud of your daughter’s quick wittiness and surprised at the initiative of Mr Speranza. Gigliola, tell your father the story.

GIGLIOLA If he (*pointing to GUGLIELMO*) tells the beginning, I’ll tell the end.

GUGLIELMO Every day I would go down *Via Mezzo Cannone* on my way to the university. Halfway there my attention was drawn to a little balcony on the ground floor of this building. It was full of pots of all kinds of flowers. I thought to myself: “I wonder who is growing those flowers. It must be a very sensitive person because the flowers are well chosen and the pots are arranged with taste.” And passing day after day, always looking across to the little balcony, one morning, I finally discovered who the talented gardener was.

GIGLIOLA I was sitting outside to get a little fresh air and pass the time, altering an old dress that I didn’t want to give away.

GUGLIELMO Miss Fortezza, we said that I was going to tell the beginning of the story and you the end.

GIGLIOLA I’m sorry. Please continue.

GUGLIELMO She threaded the needle and adjusted the dress while I sat there enchanted, my eyes glued to the balcony, as I stuffed myself with drinks and coffee sorbet in the bar across the street. “I wonder how I can meet her, in what way can I approach her?” Finally I got an idea.

STANISLAO Now comes the bit about the button.
GIROLAMO Quiet! (To GUGLIELMO) And then?

GIGLIOLA Day in and day out I worked on the dress while he filled up on coffee sorbet.

GUGLIELMO I finally got the courage. In desperation I pulled a button off my jacket.

GIGLIOLA He came over to the balcony…

GUGLIELMO (Getting up he brings his right hand up to the height of his waist to show proof of his good fortune) The railing came up to here.

GIGLIOLA “Miss, I see you have needle and thread in your hand. Could you please sew this button on for me?” “I only have white thread.” I answered. “I don’t have the color of your jacket” and he answered, “that’s all right, sew it anyway. Your eyes will have the power to change the color of the jacket.” And so I sewed it with the white thread.

GUGLIELMO (He gets up again, this time raising up the right side of his jacket, to show the button sewed on with the white thread. The button must be very big and the diagonal cross of white thread thick and very visible.) It’s no lie, folks. Here’s the button.

AMNERIS Of course, no one doubts what you’re saying.

GIROLAMO And then?
AMNERIS And then, and then… Girò, what else do you want to know, and then, things are as they are.

GIROLAMO Of course, so they are.

STANISLAO So they are.

GIROLAMO (Calling out) Laudomia!

LAUDOMIA (Coming in) Yes?

GIROLAMO Take Signorina Gigliola into the other room. Off you go, Gigliola, Mr Speranza needs to speak to me about things that concern you, so it’s better if you leave.

GIGLIOLA Papa, if they concern me isn’t it better if I stay?

GIROLAMO You’re only a child: you’re sixteen. No one can look after your interests better than your father and your uncle. Amneris, you go too.

AMNERIS Of course. (Turning toward GUGLIELMO) Excuse me.

GUGLIELMO (Getting up) Of course, Ma’am.

AMNERIS Let’s go Gigliola, come. (She goes out, preceded by GIGLIOLA.)
GIROLAMO: Sit down GUGLIELMO. (GUGLIELMO sits down again) My dear young man, clarity is virtue. Let's look each other in the eye and drop all pretence before we start talking. If your intentions are serious, we'll get along, otherwise I'm telling you straight: you've come to the wrong house.

GUGLIELMO: I can assure you that my intentions...

GIROLAMO: We will decide whether or not your intentions are serious.

STANISLAO: Exactly.

GIROLAMO: You can be sure that your situation and your proposal will be examined under the microscope scrupulously.

GUGLIELMO: Yes, but...

GIROLAMO: Yes, but you want to tell me that you have your degree now.

GUGLIELMO: Exactly.

GIROLAMO: So?

STANISLAO: Where does this leave us?

GIROLAMO: Take the advice of people with more experience than you. A degree is nothing more than a piece of paper.
GUGLIELMO  
(Thinking back to his father’s words) That’s true…

STANISLAO  
The true test, my dear young man, begins only after you have got your degree.

GIROLAMO  
And getting your degree is something, but it isn’t everything.

STANISLAO  
A degree, my dear young man, is the commitment that a young man takes on to society.

GIROLAMO  
And fate can favour both the worthy and the unworthy. The world is watching you, society watches over you, it defends itself and it does well to. Having said this, we are not insinuating that you are not capable of living up to your degree, but… as they say, we’ll just have to wait and see…

GUGLIELMO  
But diligence, what I have achieved in my studies, the respect of other people’s rights, the respect that one’s family enjoys, that I flatter myself to believe that my family enjoys, all these should count for something.

GIROLAMO  
Of course. Without a doubt the premise is good but it remains a premise.

STANISLAO  
Dear Speranza, get this into your head: once you have graduated, you have to account for yourself in society. When you graduate, all you’ve done is open a full set of accounts with a general ledger in which others, not you, take responsibility for registering the income
and expenditure of your merits and demerits as they occur through your professional, marital and family life.

GUGLIELMO (Eyes wide open) Until when?

GIROLAMO Until that “piece of paper” by popular recognition becomes a degree.

STANISLAO And remember only a privileged few manage to make the grade.

GIROLAMO Gigliola is our only child. I say no more.

GUGLIELMO Of course.

GIROLAMO I’m sure you’ll understand if both my brother-in-law and I ask you a few questions.

GUGLIELMO I shall answer them sincerely.

GIROLAMO Fine.

STANISLAO Very well.

GIROLAMO When I was young, and this is the truth, I used to like to go to an acquaintance’s house where I would meet up with a group of friends with whom I’d play cards mainly for fun; no large sums involved: a few lire that I could save from the small allowance my father gave me: fifteen lire a month. I can assure you that I never set foot in a gambling hall.
STANISLAO  Casinos never!

GUGLIELMO  I have heard of gambling halls and casinos but to tell you the truth I’ve never been in one.

GIROLAMO  But you know how to play cards.

GUGLIELMO  A game of *scopa*, a *scopone*, but since I lose because I can never remember the cards, I prefer not to play.

GIROLAMO  And you do well not to play. I have a niece, my sister’s daughter…

STANISLAO  Beatrice… poor thing!

GIROLAMO  She stubbornly insisted on marrying a no-use good for nothing against the will of the whole family.

STANISLAO  They had made all the necessary inquiries about him.

GIROLAMO  He always ate out, he always ate in restaurants, piano bars, nightclubs, and he never walked. If he had to go from *San Ferdinando* to *Largo della Carità*, he took a cab. Naturally, as was to be expected the marriage lasted less than three years.

GUGLIELMO  Don’t worry. I have only eaten in a restaurant when my university companions forced me to but I prefer to eat at home. As a matter of fact I often cook some little thing by myself. I do not go to piano bars
or nightclubs and as a means of transportation, if it’s a long distance, I ride in a sidecar.

**STANISLAO** This is the doctor talking now: how many cigarettes do you smoke and how much coffee do you drink?

**GUGLIELMO** I don’t drink much coffee: a cup in the morning and one after lunch. Sometimes I drink a third cup in the afternoon if I’m with a friend, I smoke round about seven, eight cigarettes a day.

**STANISLAO** I advise you to smoke only three at these intervals like I do: one in the morning after coffee, for personal needs… the other after lunch and a third in the evening after dinner.

**GUGLIELMO** I’m sure I can do that easily.

**STANISLAO** Have you had measles as a child?

**GUGLIELMO** I don’t remember, actually. But I’ll ask my parents and I’ll let you know.

**GIROLAMO** When the time comes you shall introduce us to your parents.

**GUGLIELMO** It will be my pleasure.

**STANISLAO** Excuse me, Girò. *(Looking at GUGLIELMO)* You must remember to ask about the measles because in an adult it can be fatal.
GUGLIELMO My parents will certainly remember.

STANISLAO Papa and mamma are healthy, are they not?

GUGLIELMO They are healthy as two logs…

STANISLAO And your grandparents?

GUGLIELMO My grandfather died when he was forty-seven.

(GIROLAMO and STANISLAO exchange suspicious looks.)

GIROLAMO So young…

GUGLIELMO A fall… he lost his balance and fell backwards hitting his head. He died on the spot.

STANISLAO Forty-seven and he lost his balance? We’ll have to investigate.

GUGLIELMO My grandmother on the other hand lived until she was ninety.

STANISLAO (Reassuring GIROLAMO) That makes up for it.

GIROLAMO I am curious to know whether you were ever engaged before.

GUGLIELMO Officially engaged, no. I went out with three or four girls for a very short while, because I realized right away that we were incompatible.
GIROLAMO  I’m sorry to say it but this attitude in respect of these three or four girls is just a clear sign of flightiness on your part.

STANISLAO  Nonsense: all young people break up and get together. Once they settle down they get their heads together. I would like to further discuss another subject. We realize full well that you are not going to come and tell us that you are a saint. I imagine that you and your friends have gone with women often. Nothing wrong so far, a few secret affairs, that from a certain point of view can be overlooked, actually reassure us for the future. If this marriage were to take place, there will be no surprises. I’d like to ask you whether you’ve ever had any mishaps.

GUGLIELMO  In my love life?

STANISLAO  No, any mishaps in personal hygiene.

GUGLIELMO  Actually I don’t understand.

STANISLAO  Well, I mean, if these wanton women…

GUGLIELMO  But they were not loose.

STANISLAO  Well, and then let’s say of ill repute.

GUGLIELMO  Ah, I see.
STANISLAO Well then, whether one of these women ever infected you with one of those unfortunate diseases a man is ashamed to admit.

GUGLIELMO Well, actually I was not expecting this sort of question.

STANISLAO Come on, we are among men and besides, I’m a doctor. Come on, speak up. If you did get anything, it certainly was not your fault.

GUGLIELMO I must admit that I am among the lucky few.

STANISLAO Are you sure?

GUGLIELMO I never had any trouble.

STANISLAO (Handing GUGLIELMO his visiting card) Tomorrow afternoon around five o’clock come to my office. I’ll examine you from top to toe. I’ll listen to your heart, check your liver, do a Wasserman test to clear up any doubt.

GIROLAMO You must forgive us. Once again I’ll repeat that Gigliola is an only child. Usually the family doctor takes on this task; fortunately we have one in the family (calling) Amneris, Gigliola. (The two women come after a short pause) Mr Guglielmo Speranza is leaving.

AMNERIS Are you going already?

GUGLIELMO I have already taken advantage of your husband and brother’s hospitality.
GIROLAMO One last thing. In the presence of my wife and daughter, and then you are free to go.

GUGLIELMO Let’s hear.

GIROLAMO My brother-in-law and I have formed the impression that the first meeting has gone well. Mr Guglielmo Speranza will give very good results in the future. In the meantime it has been decided that in a fortnight, at most a month, when we have gathered due information on your account…

STANISLAO Tomorrow afternoon at 5:30 in my office…

GUGLIELMO I’ll be there.

GIROLAMO After we’ve gathered all the information and the results of the appointment in my brother-in-law’s office, we can discuss the subject further and if all goes well decide on a date for the engagement. Let’s have another malvasía for good luck. (Amneris fills the glasses once again and Gigliola hands them around.) Let it be clear, however, right from now, that if all goes smoothly, it will take, from the day of the engagement to the wedding day, at least two years.

GUGLIELMO (Crestfallen) Two years…

GIROLAMO I said at least two years; to see whether that piece of paper they’ve given you bears any fruit.

GUGLIELMO My degree.
GIROLAMO  Exactly. Two years are a long time, I know. But for now I will allow you to come to my house so that you can both reveal your individual characters and get to know each other better. (Raising his glass) In this moment I am pleased to make a toast to the happy and complete realization of our every aspiration.

(Having raised their glasses in a toast, each continues to sip the sweet wine in silence while from offstage the chorus of students can be heard in the distance and the black velvet curtain closes. As one comes in from the right and one comes in from the left, GUGLIELMO SPERANZA and FURIO LA SPINA arrive and meet. The velvet curtain opens showing Chance-meeting Street. The effusive way the two friends embrace makes it clear to us that they have not been in touch for a long time.)

FURIO  (Noticing his friend first) Speranza!

GUGLIELMO  (With the same surprised tone) La Spina!

FURIO  Gugliè, it’s been so long!

GUGLIELMO  Let me give you a hug. (They exchange embraces. Actually it is FURIO who hugs GUGLIELMO because the latter is so weighed down with packages and parcels that he must allow FURIO to hug him) Hey, take it easy you’re suffocating me.

FURIO  Yes, you’re right, forgive me but the joy of seeing you after all these years. Gugliè, it’s been two years since we last saw each other!
GUGLIELMO Three months to go to make two years. I got three months off for good behavior. Dear La Spina…

FURIO Gugliè, you’re a friend, call me Furio. “La Spina” belongs so much to our old student ways, that as time has passed it’s become a thing, an object, a chalkboard, a portrait of King Victor Emmanuel III, of Christ..., something reminiscent of university décor. And I can tell you, I’ve tried to cancel all this from my memory. You were saying?

GUGLIELMO I don’t remember now.

FURIO Time off for good behavior.

GUGLIELMO Ah, yes, my father-in-law, rather my future father-in-law, bless his heart, he’s promoted me to official fiancée six months before the end of the regular training course, in expectation of my full commission as husband.

FURIO I see. That’s why we we haven’t seen each other for a year and nine months.

GUGLIELMO That’s about the sum of it.

FURIO But I know all about you. I never lost sight of you. I see our friends Attilio, Agostino, Corrado often. We see each other all the time and naturally we talk about you. (Patting GUGLIELMO affectionately, in an almost paternalistic way, on the shoulders with his hand) Bravo, you are really making your way up in the world.
GUGLIELMO  Well, I can’t complain.

FURIO  I’ll bet. In all the publications in your field your name’s seldom left out. I follow you and I read all about you.

GUGLIELMO  I’ve slogged away, Furio, and now I can say in all conscience that in my field I’m second to none.

FURIO  And if only you knew how bitter I feel when I am forced to defend you.

GUGLIELMO  Defend me?

FURIO  Forget it, Guglié. People are spiteful. You know how it goes, the parable of the mote and the beam.

GUGLIELMO  Yeah, sure, but I would like to know about this beam that I unwittingly put in somebody’s mote.

FURIO  You want to know precisely what people are saying?

GUGLIELMO  We’re talking about mutual friends?

FURIO  Guglié. Friends. Because I’m your friend, on the one hand I want to put you on your guard against malicious talk, on the other I’m telling you to rise above it and go your own way. You now how it is: when I failed for the nth time I had to leave university not long after you and drop out of my course definitively, or else jeopardize my health.
What could I do? What miracle was going to deliver me a job, a position? And then I took advantage of my connections in the scientific field and got involved with novelty items, small useful inventions; I patented several objects that were rather successful at the fair in Milan. For instance, shoes with built-in shoe horns, a keyring that whistles when you take it out of your pocket and keeps whistling until you put it back and lots of other little practical, fun things. I come and go from the capital… What can I say, some like you and some don’t. They say: “Yes, okay, he’s not stupid – talking about you – but given his age, would he ever have been able to get the position of responsibility that he has now if it hadn’t been for the almighty leg-up he got from his future father-in-law who, let’s be frank, has a vested interest in having for his son-in-law a person he can manipulate, who’ll have his finger on the pulse the same way as he himself once did, and still does?”

**GUGLIELMO** Slander, this is slander. Out with the names, out with the names of these contemptible people.

**FURIO** Gugliè, my brother, do you think I would come and tell you the names of these miserable wretches and dump you in the middle of a squalid little scandal, with the sole effect of spreading the dirt even further?

**GUGLIELMO** My father-in-law never got involved in my affairs or in my future, not even by giving me any simple advice. I earned the position I have now. I came in third among two thousand five hundred candidates. The little I have achieved is due to my ability, my tenacity, my intelligence.
FURIO I understand your resentment but I advise you not to get upset, because they’re already saying that you are driven, you’re a fanatic, you’re totally full of it.

GUGLIELMO They say that?

FURIO They say it, but let it pass. Just keep going the way you were. Actually if it’s the way I’m going I’ll come with you.

GUGLIELMO Thanks, but I’ve arrived.

FURIO You live here now?

GUGLIELMO No, my fiancée lives here. That’s her front door. *(He points to a spot nearby in the wings, stage right.)*

FURIO I’d really like to meet your fiancée. Gigliola is her name, isn’t it?

GUGLIELMO Yes, Gigliola. I’ll introduce you another time. She’s not home this morning. I’d gladly take you with me but it’s not an easy family. My father-in-law is very old-fashioned, very reserved and guarded.

FURIO And do you think that if I turned up with you out of the blue, I’d get a cool reception?

GUGLIELMO No, not that…

FURIO Am I or am I not your oldest friend?
GUGLIELMO Of course.

FURIO Well, then?

GUGLIELMO It’s a family conference. We are meeting to decide the wedding date.

FURIO Well, if you’ve already chosen the best man I really will be upset. Get this into your head: the best man has to be me. Guglié, I’ll be offended if you don’t make me best man.

GUGLIELMO If you want to…

FURIO Don’t you want me to…

GUGLIELMO Of course… very much.

FURIO And the best man must take part in this family conference. We must find the exact wedding date so as not to interfere with my many engagements. Is that the entrance?

GUGLIELMO Yes.

FURIO Well, come on, let’s go. You’ll see what a reception you get when you walk in and say: “Mr and Mrs Fortezza, let me introduce my best man.” Come on, let’s go. I shall finally meet the fascinating woman who has stolen you away from your friends. I am giving up everything I had on today’s agenda to enjoy this pleasure and as your
best man I will organize the ritual “Santanotte” serenade under your window on your wedding night. *(Intrusive and pushy)* Let’s go.

*(And GUGLIELMO, dejectedly, allows FURIO to accompany him. With those two gone from the scene a large group of friends of the married couple, some with guitars, some with mandolins, and other instruments form a decorative group in the middle of the street, under the windows of the newlyweds. As the concert group begins with the chorus of the serenade, FURIO LA SPINA pushes his way into the center of the group and as ritual requires, he chimes in with the couplets of “Santanotte.”)*

**FURIO**

Come, let’s sing now all together,
Full of joy and full of love.
Join us now and celebrate
Our two happy newlyweds.

**CHORUS**

Come, let’s sing now all together,
Full of joy and full of love.

**FURIO**

Join us now and celebrate
With our newlywed Gigliola…

**CHORUS**

Join us now and celebrate
With our newlywed Gigliola…

**FURIO**

Blessed be the happy mother,
Who made you so beautiful
Your eyes are like the very stars
They light a fire inside my heart!
CHORUS Come, let’s sing now all together,
Full of joy and full of love.

FURIO Join us now and celebrate
With our newlywed Guglielmo…

CHORUS Join us now and celebrate
With our newlywed Guglielmo…

CHORUS & FURIO Join us now and celebrate
Our two happy newlyweds.
Join us now and celebrate
With our newlyweds Gigliola and Guglielmo…

(The group disappears into the darkness of the night, while at the center of the stage in daylight GUGLIELMO SPERANZA appears. After a short pause, he addresses the audience directly)

GUGLIELMO My wife’s pregnant. Now I would like to know why people care whether my wife got pregnant before or after the wedding. Some things just happen whether we want them to or not. Four months ago it was a well kept secret, we didn’t tell anyone about it, not even our relatives and I fooled myself that actually nobody would be so interested to take the trouble to figure out the month, the day, the hour… Actually, it was my mother-in-law who said: “Well, it’s not the end of the world. When the girl or boy is born we’ll say it’s two months premature.” My mother-in-law’s brother, the doctor, pointed out that we could not say that it was a seven-month baby because she was four months pregnant already. Then my mother-in-law added “we’ll arrange a premature delivery.” Gigliola is overdue only by
five days, and with all the secrecy even with the relatives I’m already getting anonymous letters full of ironic insinuations and best wishes for the premature happy event – with premature underlined. There is one who has the nerve to say: “We congratulate you once again on the obvious outcome of your wedding five months ago and we offer you our good wishes for the birth of your heir which will take place in five or six days,” and ends by saying “Ain’t nobody stupid here.” Now I don’t know why people are afraid of being regarded as stupid if they ignore an innocent situation like mine and think that perhaps they will purge their stupidity by sending an anonymous letter like that. The other thing that’s driving me crazy is that I can’t figure out who was so indiscreet as to spread the word. *For a moment he is absorbed in thought* “The degree is only a piece of paper.” My poor father. He gave me so much advice and said so many things! Once he said: “Gugliè, my son, remember this, and keep it fixed in your mind: Life will bring you thorns as well as roses.” *In that moment Furio arrives. GUGLIELMO sees him and for a moment is struck by that presence but he immediately pulls himself together, greeting his “old friend” warmly* Dear Furio!

**Furio** Wrong again! You should be calling me godfather! But I forgive you because at least you didn’t call me by my last name: Spina.

**Guglielmo** *(He remains silent a moment longer than whispers a disoriented)* Thorn, right…

*(Finally, in silence, the two friends walk together toward the wings. The two go out to the side. From offstage the voice of the singer who comes in from the wings singing and playing a hit song from 1935, while from the other side GUGLIELMO comes in. He reaches center stage and stops there, staring intensely at the audience. The girl*
crosses behind GUGLIELMO, she moves on away from him and goes out on the opposite side. GUGLIELMO takes off the black beard and puts on the gray one, and then with a smile full of modesty, he shows it to the audience.)

GUGLIELMOTime flies. The last time we met was exactly ten years ago. It seems like just yesterday. How can so many things happen in such a short time and so many changes come about. If I were to calculate how my life has gone in this decade I’m not sure whether I would close at a loss but not at a profit either. There have been moments of real joy, but also very bitter ones. Two children, both boys during the first three years of marriage make one happy; but both for different reasons brought me doubts and disappointment. During the reception for the first one’s baptism, for instance; I was disappointed because all the guests, from the first to the last, stood around the baby in turn and in groups of five or six observing the baby from head to toe. Some of the guests put on glasses to see more clearly, some took them off to clean them and then put them back on again… They exchanged impressions saying: “Good God. He looks just like his father.” One by one then they came up to me shaking my hand, saying: “Congratulations, Gugliè, he’s identical to you.” And it affected me, and sometimes I still feel that hand slapping me on the back, the hand of an old lady, who as a matter of fact, I had never met until that moment, saying: “This child is your spitting image.” None of this happened at the birth of our second child; no hints about the child looking like me, just handshakes and congratulations. “What a beautiful baby,” “He’s a real peach.” But in truth this time your wife is the dominant factor. You had nothing to do with this one. And so, if the first time I thought: “Why such amazement, such surprise, that my son should look like me? It must mean that if he didn’t look like me they would have doubted my paternity? Then all these people are not guests, they are part of an inquisition. The
second time around, I was testy and doubtful. Of course… “This time your wife did it all by herself,” “You had nothing to do with it.”… And since there was a precedent… you have a right to know everything. Here is the way things stand. Gigliola, like all girls her age, before she met me, had met her first love, an innocent love. You know how it is: all fire and flames. The family did not look favorably on this marriage so the young couple had to abandon their project. Gigliola confided all this to me but you know how it is. “This time your wife did it all by herself,” “You had nothing to do with it.” I fell into a slump, a state of crisis. At night I couldn’t sleep. It was so bad that one night while the whole family was gathered in the living room because some relatives were coming to visit, I went into the baby’s room, undressed him and looked him over very carefully. The more I looked, the less he seemed to be my son. I thought: “Now I’ll turn him over to look at the other side of him.” But while I tried to do this, all of a sudden, I felt so mortified and petty that I would have preferred the ground to open and swallow me with my son and the whole house. Well, yes, because I thought: “What right did I have to observe the body of this child, to try and see if the color of his eyes were like mine, to measure the width of his forehead, the shape of his skull, his hands, his feet? You mean that for this tiny being exams had already begun?” And I was as ashamed as a thief to recognize in myself the most zealous of snoops. This, though, is not the only negative event of the decade. Three years ago my father-in-law died and a few months later his brother-in-law, the doctor, followed him to the grave. My children? They are growing up. One is named FORTUNATO, the other FELICE. It’s not necessary that I introduce them to you now; when the right moment comes we’ll talk about them.

I can’t complain about my career because I am thought of highly even by the biggest snobs. All the publications that publish our events, are very careful when they mention my name and dole out
carefully any compliments of praise to me always including a “maybe” or a “but” or a “we shall see.” That’s all. (After staring at the audience with his inquisitive look and acknowledged their disbelief) Noooo? That’s not all, you’re right. (With a complacent smile) That’s not all. (With a grimace like the one of a child who is caught doing something he shouldn’t be doing) I’m ashamed to tell you. On the other hand, I promised I would hide nothing from you and I must keep my word. I fell in love with a girl, deeply in love. She’s very young. I don’t even know if she is beautiful, but she is enchanting to me. I look at her and I am fascinated…. (short pause). There’s nothing else. (With the same inquisitive look as before he stares at the audience, then he gives up once again) Whaaat? There’s more? (He becomes sad) Yes, you’re right. There is more. I have tried to hide the saddest part; but if one day I am desperate, if they really push me into a corner. I swear that I shall tell you the whole story.

(The curtain rises to reveal “Chance-meeting Street.” GIGLIOLA and FURIO come out from one of the wings. GIGLIOLA has been to the stores, she’s full of packages. GUGLIELMO notices them first) Gigliò finally. (He looks at his watch) I’ve been waiting for you for three quarters of an hour.

GIGLIOLA Who told you to wait?

GUGLIELMO We agreed on it when we went out. You were to go shopping and I was to go to the banks and the offices. As a matter of fact, you were the one who said: “We’ll meet here.”

GIGLIOLA Too bad for you if after ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, you preferred to wait rather than go.
GUGLIELMO  Well, that’s nice. You would come and you wouldn’t find me. You know I’m not a heel who would not show up for an appointment with a woman.

GIGLIOLA  *(Bitterly)* Oh, of course, appointments with women must be kept, but then again I am just your wife.

GUGLIELMO  Well, a wife is a wife.

GIGLIOLA  How sweet, we’ve come to this, that you tell me to my face.

GUGLIELMO  What?

GIGLIOLA  That I have to thank God that I’m your wife or else you would treat me like an old shoe.

*(There is a painful silence.)*

GUGLIELMO  *(Alarmed, tries to question his friend with a look, hoping to get an explanation for his wife’s attitude but FURIO very casually avoids all contact with GUGLIELMO who wisely changes the subject)* Well, I’d rather not dwell on this.

GIGLIOLA  That’s a good idea.

GUGLIELMO  Well, did you get around to all the stores, did you have fun, and did you buy everything you needed?
GIGLIOLA Of course.

GUGLIELMO Did you get my cologne?

GIGLIOLA I didn’t have enough money.

GUGLIELMO That’s all right. You can get it tomorrow.

GIGLIOLA I’m not going out tomorrow. That means that either you buy your cologne yourself or you get someone who knows about perfumes to buy it for you.

GUGLIELMO Gigliò, what’s wrong with you? *(GIGLIOLA doesn’t answer)* Furio, do you know anything about this?

FURIO Yes, I noticed how my dear friend became upset and how her mood darkened as soon as she saw you but you know the saying: “Between a husband and wife, don’t go making strife.”

GIGLIOLA Is this investigation going to last long?

GUGLIELMO It’s not an investigation. It’s just that since when I left you under the building you were in a very good mood, happy and content… you must understand that I’m worried finding you totally changed.

GIGLIOLA What can you do about it? Even the weather changes from one moment to the next. Basically we too are susceptible to change just like the thermometer.
GUGLIELMO Of course, but the weather hasn’t changed; it’s the same as when we left each other under the building.

GIGLIOLA The weather may be the same but something that has more influence than the weather has really turned me upside down. (To FURIO) Dear friend. Goodbye.

FURIO Goodbye, take care, I’ll see you soon.

(GIGLIOLA leaves in a hurry without even looking at GUGLIELMO. The curtain closes behind the backs of the two men.)

GUGLIELMO This is crazy. Did you meet her on the street?

FURIO Yes.

GUGLIELMO And she was already in a bad mood when you met her?

FURIO I didn’t notice.

GUGLIELMO Did she talk about me?

FURIO Yes, the usual things. Are you worried?

GUGLIELMO Of course. I hope she didn’t find out… well, in a word… yes.

FURIO About your affair?
GUGLIELMO Yes, about this particular time that I am going through…

FURIO Of confusion?

GUGLIELMO I don’t like the way you’re answering me.

FURIO What do you mean?

GUGLIELMO You know something that you’re not telling me. Yes, you know it’s not confusion. This girl I met…

FURIO Bonaria?

GUGLIELMO And who else? I love her and you know it. If I haven’t left my wife yet it’s only because of the children.

FURIO Really.

GUGLIELMO *(In an official tone)* Let me speak. I am trying to be very careful. I hardly ever see Bonaria; and this is a great sacrifice for me; the place where we meet is a tavern that truck drivers and teamsters stop at because it’s 20 kilometers from the main road.

FURIO What are you trying to say?

GUGLIELMO That you are the only one who knows this place because I took you to introduce you to Bonaria.
FURIO  I hope you’re not insinuating that I was the one to tell Gigliola about this Bonaria person.

GALILEO  Forgive me. I’m sorry but I must confess that I did have my doubts.

FURIO  I’m sorry. I’m really very sorry.

GUGLIELMO  It can’t be true. No, it can’t be you. That would be the end.

FURIO  Thank God for that.

GUGLIELMO  Then that can’t be the reason for Gigliola’s bad mood.

FURIO  Yes, that is the reason.

GUGLIELMO  It is?

FURIO  Yes.

GUGLIELMO  And, how do you know?

FURIO  Gigliola told me.

GUGLIELMO  And who told her?

FURIO  Gugliè, where have you been? Open your eyes; the city is full of talk about this affair of yours. Everywhere, everyone says the same thing
“It’s a matter of waiting, of seeing what his wife decides she’s going to do about this situation.”

GUGLIELMO Is that what they say?

FURIO Yes, just that… I can’t begin to tell the trouble I’ve had personally.

GUGLIELMO You?

FURIO Of course. They all know that we are friends and so they want to know from me how this affair began, how and where you met this girl, whether she is pretty or ugly, how old she is… I can’t begin to tell you how embarrassed I am when they want to know what I think of this, of your losing your mind; if your wife will make a tragedy of it, if in the end she will it accept it as a fait accompli. Anyway, I have no peace.

GUGLIELMO And what do you say?

FURIO What can I say? On the one hand, I am your friend and I care about you. On the other, I think Gigliola didn’t deserve this…I try to get out of it saying here… there… this, that…. Of course… but you know how it is and so and so and so… etc… etc… etc….

(FURIO’s last words are lost in the wings while the two go out. The velvet curtain opens, showing the living room of the Speranza household. AMNERIS and two young friends of the family, MRS CUCURULLO and MRS PICIOCCA, are sitting around the table. LAUDOMIA goes around the table taking the tea cups and after
AMNERIS We are two women on our own. My daughter as proud as she is… She’s the spitting image of her father, God rest his soul! She keeps all the bitterness inside and he takes advantage of this to do whatever he wants. Filthy pig! He has completely forgotten his duties towards his wife and children.

GIGLIOLA (Coming in) Here it is. (She holds up a little package wrapped up in a flowered paper and tied on top with a ribbon.) I closed it in here otherwise the perfume would evaporate.

PICIOCCA I thought the same thing. I made mine into a package and I saved it. (She takes out a little package and shows.) Here it is.

LAUDOMIA (From inside) May I come in?

AMNERIS Come in.

LAUDOMIA (Coming in) Their best man is here.

AMNERIS Let him in.

LAUDOMIA (Toward the inside) Come in, please.
FURIO  *(Entering)* Thank you. *(LAUDOMIA goes out.)* Signora Amneris, at your service. *(He kisses her hand)* Ladies. *(A short bow towards the two ladies.)*

AMNERIS  *(Pointing towards Furio)* If it weren’t for him, my daughter and I would have known nothing.

FURIO  When I realized that it was serious and not just a fling I felt I had to tell Gigliola the whole story.

PICIOCCA  Of course.

GIGLIOLA  And so, the handkerchief that I found in the pocket of his pants is in this envelope?

FURIO  What does this handkerchief mean?

AMNERIS  From your information we came to know only that the woman going out with my son-in-law’s name is Bonaria and that she works in a perfume shop.

PICIOCCA  I immediately thought of the girl who works in the perfume shop where I buy my perfume because her name is Bonaria too so I immediately…

CUCURULLO  *(Interrupting her friend)* Excuse me, Margherì, this is so we can find out whether the shop girl where Margherita goes to is the same one…
FURIO Where Guglielmo goes.

GIGLIOLA A few days ago I found a handkerchief in Guglielmo’s pants pocket that had the smell of a perfume that he had never used.

PICIOCCA As soon as Gigliola told me that she had found this handkerchief…

AMNERIS The idea of looking in your husband’s pants pocket was mine.

GIGLIOLA Yes, Mamma. No one is taking the credit away from you. Mrs Piciocca was speaking. And then?

PICIOCCA When Gigliola told me about this handkerchief, without even asking her opinion, the next morning I decided to put my idea to the test. I get dressed, go out and head for the perfume shop. Let me say that the handkerchief Gigliola let me sniff had the same smell that this girl Bonaria, had on herself, but I wanted to be sure that it was the same. I got to the store but I wanted to be sure that it was the same girl. She was at the counter. *(Imitating the gestures and the voice of Bonaria trying to make her seem ridiculous)* “Good morning, Mrs Piciocca.” “Good morning, dear.” “What can I do for you?” “I have to buy a little gift for a friend. Please advise me on a perfume that will be appreciated.” “This is something that just came in.” This yes, this no, not this and so on and so forth… Finally I pretended to notice the perfume she was wearing and I said: “The perfume you are wearing has a great scent, let me try it… Yes, this could do, because the person I’m buying it for is thin like you and as a matter of fact she looks like you, too. As a matter of fact, put a few drops into a handkerchief, I’ll let her sniff it and if she likes the scent I’ll buy it knowing that I’ve made the right choice.” She was very kind, I must
say, in immediately taking the bottle from the show case window and
opened it just for me. “And if she should not like it?” I said. “Well,
then I’ll keep it. It’s the perfume I use anyway.” (She takes the
package out of her purse and shows it.) The handkerchief is in here.
(She begins to open it.)

GIGLIOOLA No, wait. If there is a difference between the two, they will be mixed
up and the test will not work. Let’s separate, you stay over there and
me here. (She points out the two opposite sides of the living room.)
Our friend will sniff my handkerchief first than yours.

(The two women go to the corners indicated by GIGLIOOLA.)

FURIO (A bit worried about this task that has just been assigned to him) I
really don’t want this responsibility.

GIGLIOOLA Don’t make such a fuss, my dear.

FURIO I wouldn’t think of it. You know though… the fact is that a few years
ago I had a terrible sinus infection. I’m cured now but my sense of
smell has suffered from it. Couldn’t Signora Amneris do it?

AMNERIS Only God knows how bad my nose is stuffed up.

FURIO Let’s do this. Mrs Piciocca, I’ll take your place with the handkerchief
and you smell first mine than Gigliola’s.

PICIOLLA But I know the perfume and so I can easily be influenced and
therefore make a mistake.
FURIO Well, I’ll try. I want to blow my nose first and then we’ll begin the test. *(He blows his nose a couple of times)* Okay, are we ready?

PICIOCCA Yes, yes.

FURIO *(Sniffs first one then the other; he stops half way between the two women turns up his nose repeatedly; he does it again, then finally answers)* There is no doubt that it is the same perfume.

PICIOCCA Your husband’s Bonaria is the same one I know.

AMNERIS Have them both arrested, without pity.

GIGLIOLA Be quiet, Mamma.

CUCURULLO You need proof to accuse someone of adultery.

AMNERIS You said you smell the same perfume on your husband’s sweaters, and shirts?

GIGLIOLA And so?

AMNERIS The handkerchiefs, sweaters and shirts can be brought to court…

FURIO But my dear lady the courthouse is not a laundry. One washes, and it really is a case in point, one’s dirty linen at home.
GIGLIOLA  I’ll wind up throwing myself out of a window and ending it all. I can’t stand it anymore. Oh! (She bursts into tears making sure she is credible and moving at the same time.)

CUCURULLO  (Like a bad actress, who, however, knows her part by heart, she rushes to Gigliola to comfort her) Gigliò, what’s this? You must be brave.

PICIOCCA  Everything will work out…

CUCURULLO & PICIOCCA  (Together in unison) You’re always the wife.

CUCURULLO  Hmmm, excuse me.

PICIOCCA  Of course, go ahead and speak.

CUCURULLO  No, no, you speak.

PICIOCCA  No, please.

CUCURULLO  We were saying you’re always his wife…

GIGLIOLA  What does that mean? (Between sobs) He treats me like a servant.

AMNERIS  Yes, a decision must be made. We are all getting sick over this, especially my daughter; she’s becoming a hag!
CUCURULLO  Look what we have to stand for, just look!

FURIO  Calm down, my dear, calm down. Let’s try to reason calmly because I think we’ve come to the crucial point of the matter of my dear friend’s damn breakdown.

AMNERIS  Uh! My God!

GIGLIOLA  What else can happen?

CUCURULLO  If you want to be alone, we can go.

AMNERIS  No, you know everything: please stay.

CUCURULLO  All right then, you were saying, Furio?

FURIO  This morning I wasn’t supposed to be here. When I left the house I was supposed to leave for Rome, to go to the Ministry, because I wanted to have my invention, the bottle with two lids, patented.

Cucurulla  Why, isn’t one lid enough?

FURIO  Of course, one is not enough. Are you kidding? My two-lidded bottle will revolutionize the field of bottling. Yes, because I’ll leave the first lid where it has always been, the second will be placed under the bottleneck three inches from the other.

CUCURULLO  For what reason?
PICIOCCA  Yes, why, why?

FURIO  Because let’s say you’re at a game, at the horse race track, on a boat ... somewhere where you haven’t got a glass, with a pull you remove both lids, the air enters the bottle, so you can drink to your heart’s content without your lips being sucked into the inside of the bottle.

CUCURULLO  What fun…

PICIOCCA  And where can this bottle be bought?

FURIO  Nowhere, it still has to be patented.

GIGLIOLA  My dear, we were speaking about my husband.

FURIO  Yes, and speaking about him the bottle came about.

AMNERIS  If I don’t have a clean transparent crystal glass I won’t drink, not even at gun point.

GIGLIOLA  (Getting impatient) Well then?

FURIO  And as I was telling you: on my way to the station I met Guglielmo. He was numb, confused. He scared me. The girl is leaving. She’s going to leave him!

AMNERIS  Ah! Thank God…
FURIO Go easy with these thanks and praises, Mrs Amneris. This situation is not over so easily.

CUCURULLO If you ask me it’s already over. The girl was clever. She took advantage of the situation as long as she could. She had him buy her dresses, jewels, at least that’s what I heard, and who knows if she didn’t make him put some property in her name… I don’t remember who said this… she did what she wanted to, well and now she said goodbye and off she went.

FURIO If this Bonaria were smarter than we think she used the fact that she is leaving, sure that Guglielmo, as enamored as he is would leave home, wife and children, and leave with her.

GIGLIOLA I’m jumping out the window, I’m jumping!

CUCURULLO Just look what one has to go through.

PICIOCCA I don’t believe he would dare abandon the family.

AMNERIS He has always seemed very attached to the children.

GIGLIOLA He will, he will… I’m sure.

FURIO You’re right, dear. He is going through a very difficult time. When I met him this morning, I told you I was scared. “I can’t lose this woman,” he said. “I’ll die but I won’t lose her.” And I really told him off, warned him: “Be careful what you do, you’ll destroy yourself… These days the private life of a man who is in the limelight can ruin
him.” And that’s the truth. Everybody’s eyes and ears are on you. The fight for survival exists and if a colleague can take advantage of you he will. In other words, I said everything I could to convince him but I’m sure he wasn’t listening. “Leave me be, let me go. I have an appointment with Bonaria.” He said goodbye in a hurry and left. What a shame! A man like him lost running after a shop girl!

AMNERIS A disgusting person who can’t hold a candle up to my daughter.

GIGLIOLA (Calling in a firm and decisive voice) Laudomia!

CUCURULLO What is it?

AMNERIS What can you do?

GIGLIOLA (Annoyed) L-a-u-d-o-m-i-a!

LAUDOMIA (Coming in quickly) Yes.

GIGLIOLA Bring me my hat, my bag, and my umbrella. Either my father’s umbrella or my late uncle Stanislao’s, God rest their souls. In other words, I want the strongest umbrella we have in the house.

(LAUDOMIA goes out.)

AMNERIS Why, where are you going? Speak to me, tell me…

CUCURULLO Gigliò, think of what you’re doing.
GIGLIOLA There’s not a minute to lose, where is this appointment?

FURIO In a dive that truck drivers, cabbies, and mason construction workers
go to… it’s no place for you, my dear!

GIGLIOLA I’ll even go to Hell, but he’s going to stay here, at home by his
children, like me.

(LAUDOMIA returns with the things that she has been asked to bring;
GIGLIOLA hurries to put on her hat, she grabs her bag, gloves and the
umbrella and runs towards the door. The others follow her trying to
calm her down with the proper words.)
Act Two

At a tavern on the outskirts of town. GIGLIOLA and BONARIA are seated at a table facing each other. They have already had a dispute and now they sit in stubborn silence staring each other down. Each woman is leaving it to the other to come up with the proper solution to the problem. Between the two, however, only GIGLIOLA is anxious and devoured by hatred. BONARIA feels strong, having made up her mind after meditating at length, and so she is calm and without rancor. After a long pause it is GIGLIOLA who interrupts the silence and asks in a dry and hasty tone:

GIGLIOLA And so?

BONARIA (Impassively) Excuse me, Signora, but I should be the one asking “And so?” and not for the same reason as you. And if you want to know I’ll tell you but I’ll tell you the rest too because otherwise my “And so” would make no sense just as yours makes no sense.

GIGLIOLA So let’s hear this “So” with all the rest.

BONARIA I will tell you all the rest, so that then you’ll go and leave me alone. The fact is you haven’t understood what I just told you. What does this mean? It means that either you don’t want to understand or you are a fool.

GIGLIOLA Watch your tongue.
BONARIA If you didn’t want to understand, I’ll repeat it again, if you are stupid, don’t make me waste my time.

GIGLIOLA I told you, watch your tongue.

BONARIA I told you once and I’ll repeat that nothing more exists between your husband and me: It’s all over. And it’s not because we got tired of each other. We were afraid of the wife, the children, and the people. People are frightening. They started questioning first me, then that poor Guglielmo. “We saw you there.” “We saw you here.” Last night you were seen at the movies.” “You went to the park in the car.” “We saw you in the doorway in such and such a street at such and such a number.” Constantly, and they saw us even when we didn’t go to the movies or to the park, nor in such and such a street. There have never been so many people coming and going into the shop where I work since the new age: “Bonaria-Guglielmo Speranza.” People were coming and going continuously, especially men. It’s disgusting! And so I was the one who called it quits.

GIGLIOLA Quits?

BONARIA I’m leaving. I had them transfer me to the Milan branch.

GIGLIOLA If you do this, my husband will be more in love than ever and it will be easier for you to get him to put a small property in your name: a furnished three room flat with a kitchen and a bath.

BONARIA You don’t understand anything.
GIGLIOLA  *(Stubbornly, sure that Bonaria is lying)* In this way, the secret visits by the fool who pays will become more seldom and those by the occasional clients more frequent.

BONARIA  That’s an illusion that all women left by their husbands share. Naturally I couldn’t expect you to say to me: “I lost my husband because with you he feels that he’s found paradise and with me he is in hell.” That’s why I’m leaving. Because if that little bit of paradise, that Guglielmo found with me and I with him, is going to be poisoned by the hell he is surrounded by in his home and outside of it, then it’s for him to stay in the hell that is his home, and for me to be in the hell of that shop in Milan.

GIGLIOLA  What do you mean? Speak clearly. In other words you want me to believe that you are so much in love with my husband that you prefer to leave rather than see him suffer?

BONARIA  No, to give him some peace. Because if I stay here, if we don’t end it up definitively, our friendship, how can I put it…

GIGLIOLA  *(In a mean tone)* Your squalid affair…

BONARIA  No, dear signora, if that’s what you want to think then I’ve got to tell you what out of politeness I did not want to say, Signora: our love, because it is love that I am talking about. *(Only now the apparent coldness ends and her eyes fill with tears. She controls herself and continues)* I want to leave so that Guglielmo will have a chance to put some order in his life both at home and outside the home. Guglielmo has already been very successful in his career and he will
continue to be so. You as a wife can be very helpful to him. Me as a mistress would ruin him.

**Gigliola** *(Ironically) Will you look at this… you really want to be *La Bohème*? Alfredo and Violetta…*

**Bonaria** No, you’re wrong.

**Gigliola** Romeo and Juliet, then?

**Bonaria** Signora, you’re educated, I’m not. My father was a doorman; my mother was a cleaner. I never knew my father. All these names… Alfredo and Violetta, Juliet and Romeo… I never heard of them before. I was a manicurist and that’s how I met Guglielmo, then I found work in Janton’s perfume shop down at Chiaia. If you don’t want to believe that Guglielmo is the only man in my life, that’s your business. What’s my business is that, the only proof of our love is to separate definitively. And that’s what we shall do. *(Calling out)*  Signora Teresenella!

**Teresa** *(The owner of the tavern comes out joining them quickly)* What would you like?

**Bonaria** This lady is Guglielmo Speranza’s sister. She knows everything. She’d like to see the correspondence between Guglielmo and me. Will you bring it please?

**Teresa** Of course, as you wish.
GIGLIOLA  What are you getting at? What kind of joke is this? What do I care about your correspondence? I haven’t got time to waste.

BONARIA  Don’t worry. There are no letters.

TERESA  (Returning with two big packs of cards which she hands to Bonaria) Here you are. (Towards Gigliola) Madame, you’re Don Guglielmo’s sister? Have you ever seen your brother and this girl when they are together?

GIGLIOLA  (Pretending to agree, grits her teeth) No…

TERESA  I can tell you it’s a pleasure to watch them. They’ve been coming here since they met. He’s married… he told me… and of course what can they do…. When he can he rushes here… I prepare them delicious little dinners…. Isn’t that so Miss Bonaria? (Bonaria’s eyes are shining again.) And they sit here, at this same table and coochy-coochy-coo, hand in hand, eyes locked. Then when sometimes they can’t meet for six, seven, even ten days, then they send each other postcards using this address and I save them for them. Excuse me. (She leaves them.)

BONARIA  I can’t write so well and so I couldn’t dare write to him, such an educated person, a letter full of mistakes… Postcards, yes, with one word. “Heart-of-mine,” just one word, and he would answer me in the same way so as not to mortify me.

GIGLIOLA  And so that’s why you’re leaving?
BONARIA That’s why I’m leaving.

GIGLIOLA What about me?

BONARIA What about you?

GIGLIOLA And who could stand to have in the house a man who is bitter and disillusioned, a man who limits his marital duties to: “Here’s the money for the shopping,” and “Bring this to the tailor,” “How are the children doing?” “Where do you want to take the kids this summer?”

BONARIA With a little patience perhaps as time goes by…

GILGIOLA Our life together will get better!

BONARIA Well… right.

GIGLIOLA (In the meantime a malicious gleam appears in her half-closed eyes) While you were speaking I was watching you and thinking: I like this girl, I envy her. Not because she was lucky with Guglielmo, no, but because you have what I don’t have, you are a decided person, you know what you want and how far you can go to get it. Couldn’t you, in the meantime, change your plans?

BONARIA What do you mean?
Gigliola

I could pretend to not notice... and you could change your departure date, until perhaps as time goes by things between my husband and I turn to normal.

Bonaria

(Not at all shocked by this proposal, answers with that detached tone that she has used the whole time with Gigliola) Signora, listen to me, my mother was a beautiful woman. When she sat outside the doorway, all the men in the neighborhood who passed our street desired her. I was eleven, a skinny kid but already developed. When I saw that she straightened up the bedroom, closed the window, and covered the lamp that was on the dresser with a handkerchief made of Japanese silk, I would go behind the screen where I slept, get undressed and wait. After a while, I would hear the door open and I understood that the man who lived on the third floor had come in. This would happen every two weeks, when his wife would go to visit her family in Benevento. This man would get into bed with my mother. I could hear them getting undressed from behind the screen. After about ten minutes passed, my mother would call out to me, “Bonà, honey, climb on the dresser and stand up by the lamp. Don’t hurt yourself, that’s a good girl!” The dresser was right in front of the bed. And so the show would begin. “Turn around,” and I would turn. “Stand sideways,” and I would. “Sit on the dresser,” and I would sit....

Gigliola

(Horrified) My God!

Bonaria

Signora, that’s the difference between us. That’s why you always know what you want. As for me I know only what I don’t want. Your life with your husband, get this straight, will never be as it was again.
GIGLIOLA You’ve ruined our lives!

BONARIA Signora, your marriage was already ruined; otherwise Guglielmo would never have gone with me.

GIGLIOLA *(In a fury, slapping BONARIA)* You slut!

BONARIA *(As if unfeeling, looking at the postcards one by one)* Heart-of mine…

GIGLIOLA You viper! *(Another slap)*

BONARIA Heart-of-mine…

*(GUGLIELMO enters and stands aside watching the scene)*

GIGLIOLA Damn you! *(Yet another slap)*

BONARIA *(Continuing to read the cards)* Heart-of-mine!

GIGLIOLA Bitch! *(Another slap)*

BONARIA *(Reading, but barely controlling the impulse to burst into tears)* Heart-of-mine!

GUGLIELMO *(He comes rushing in, grabbing with apparent calmness GIGLIOLA’s arms tightly so as to not let her out of his hold. Then he stares at her)*
threateningly with repressed anger) Don’t you dare touch Bonaria again. (He forces his wife to slap herself first with her right hand then with her left saying) Understand? (Gigliola is frozen, her eyes wide as Guglielmo continues) Don’t you dare hurt this girl. Did you… (slap with the right hand) understand? (Slap with the left; then he loosens the hold and forces his wife to cross her arms like a schoolgirl and motions her to remain silent putting his finger on his nose) Shhhh! Understand? (Gigliola is frozen in the position he puts her in. Her husband turns toward Bonaria with great tenderness)

The car is waiting and your bags are inside. If you want to you can go. Go, now!

Bonaria (Picking the postcards up from the table) And these?

Guglielmo Take them with you. When you have the strength, burn them.

Bonaria takes the cards, and after looking at length into Guglielmo’s eyes with a look filled with a melancholy gaze, without looking at Gigliola she heads for the door and leaves; Guglielmo sits, slowly in Bonaria’s seat. After a long pause, you can hear the sound of a motor start up and the sound of a car that leaves; when the noise gets farther away and lost in the distance on the country road, he asks) Do you want to eat breakfast here or just have a drink? The food in this little place is very good and they serve chilled white wine; that’s just what we need.

Gigliola, disgusted, gets up and leaves without saying a word; left alone free from her cumbersome presence Guglielmo relaxes leaning his elbows on the table and putting his fists together. After a short while Furio comes in. He moves slowly, uncertainly but when he sees Guglielmo weighed down by a resigned desperation he stops, staring at his friend for a moment with a sympathetic look, that
leaves no doubt about the satisfaction he feels in that moment. A minute later his expression changes into an anxious face that denotes the anxiety that is appropriate to his feigned brotherly concern. In response to his friend’s misfortune, a seemingly heartbroken look comes over his face. At the same time, he feigns a compassionate attitude by extending his hand toward his old school chum.)

FURIO My dear Guglielmo, what’s happening? Aren’t things getting out of hand? Come on! You’re a man with responsibilities. Gigliola is literally devastated. Not to mention your mother-in-law. I went to your house to say “hello” but she told me to run here to see what was happening. Well, yes, because the poor woman wasn’t able to dissuade Gigliola from coming here to catch you with this Bonaria girl.

GUGLIELMO Cut out the nonsense because you know damn well that you were the one who brought Gigliola here.

FURIO (Hypocritically) Who, me?

GUGLIELMO And don’t deny it: you’ll only make it worse. I saw you when I arrived; I was closing the car door and you were in front of the entrance of the house next door where the sign Fresh Eggs is written and you were drinking one.

FURIO Maybe you saw someone in a film drinking that egg.

GUGLIELMO And who gave Gigliola the address of this place?
FURIO It’s common knowledge that you and Bonaria meet here.

GUGLIELMO It became common knowledge after you found out about it.

FURIO: I feel sorry for you because in this moment you have lost all control of yourself.

GUGLIELMO Fortunately! This is my only joy, because not having control over this “me,” who now disgusts me, I can openly tell you that I will no longer stand the sight of you and I want you out of my life. I will no longer stand for your: “yes, okay, but….” I can’t stand having to be civil and bow down to the laws I don’t believe in when “no” would be what I want to cry out. “Yes” extorted by the complicity of good manners must be maintained at any price if you don’t want to be considered rude and a delinquent.

FURIO Are you speaking to me?

GUGLIELMO Exactly! It seems incredible when the discussion doesn’t go in the direction it is expected to go in according to common practice and for you all this out of the blue.

FURIO What does this discussion have to do with what you did? What “yeses” did I make you say… and what “nos” would you have wanted to pronounce?

GUGLIELMO Wait. (He hurriedly writes something on an envelope that he has taken out of his pocket) You want to know one of the “yeses” that
you forced out of me? Here’s one: you insisted on being my best man.

**Furio**  
Insisted?

**Guglielmo**  
You stayed after me like a tick. In what way could I have possibly made you understand that I didn’t want you as my best man?

**Furio**  
How squalid! I would never have expected you to be so petty.

**Guglielmo**  
*(Exulting)* I wrote your answer on this envelope! Here it is! *(Feeling the joy of having caught the two-faceness of a fellow man, he reads what he had written on the envelope)* “I didn’t think you were so petty.” The only difference is in the fact that you said: “I didn’t think that you were,” instead of “I never would have thought.” And you’ve always acted the same with me since college.

**Furio**  
If you kept all this poison inside, for all these years, it’s something we can discuss calmly. But we were talking about something else now, you were just accusing me of having brought Gigliola here to have her catch you with Bonaria.

**Guglielmo**  
It’s all the same. That’s what I told you. Yes, it’s true. You took Gigliola here I’m sure of it. Get out of my life, get out! Long live the Arabs; long live the high walls that surround their houses. Bless the houses with shuttered windows! Everything inside under lock and key; pains, joy, victories, failures, everything! Everything locked inside! Bitter days, sweet, happy, painful days of our lives in the hands of people like you become goods that can be sold by the yard in the houses on the streets and in the squares of the city. And so I
want to take off the fool’s outfit that they have insisted on putting on me and after having put it on me they even say it fits me perfectly!

**TERESA**  
(Going towards **FURIO**, with a bill to pay in her hand: It’s written on a piece of paper that’s crumpled and greasy) This is the bill for what you ordered with Mr Guglielmo’s sister… if you don’t want to pay now, I’ll save it for you.

**FURIO**  
(Confused, he raises his head to stare guiltily at **GUGLIELMO**, but meeting the eyes of his accuser, he turns and rests his angry stare on poor **TERESA** I’ll pay now. Here. (He hands some coins over to the woman) Keep the change.

**TERESA**  
Thank you. (She puts the money in her pocket and moves away.)

(Now **FURIO** instead of showing any remorse in the face of this clear moral loss, is excited and happy to be able to throw all that he always thought of this phony, who is standing in front of him, and before he opens up he stares at **GUGLIELMO** with a poisonous look, but **GUGLIELMO** is ready for **FURIO**’s attack.)

**GUGLIELMO**  
Come on, spit it out.

**FURIO**  
(After a short pause) You also were holding back your bilious thoughts.

**GUGLIELMO**  
And so?
Furio: But if you take off the fool’s clothes you’ll still be in shirttails and underwear and these are a fool’s attire. Under these there is your undershirt always a fool’s as are your socks and shoes. If you take off your skin that is also a fool’s, you’re left with a fool’s bones even more foolish than your clothes and if they break your head a fool’s brain would be inside. Got it?

Guglielmo: And so?

Furio: And do you know why your degree didn’t remain just a “piece of paper” but for some saintly reason took on the semblance of what in hotels they call a *passepartout* and what in life is called corruption, protectionism, nepotism, you know why?

Guglielmo: Because of the corruption, the protection, and the ambition of my father-in-law…

Furio: As a social climber you always had foresight. As a matter of fact, you picked Gigliola. And you returned the favor by slapping her in front of that slut of yours. She told me in tears just a while ago.

Guglielmo: I slapped Gigliola with her own hands to not touch her, you I’ll slap with my own hands!

Furio: Poor Guglielmo!

Guglielmo: I don’t want to see you ever again!
FURIO Don’t worry you won’t dear friend. *(Getting up and going towards the door)* Remember though, Mr Guglielmo Speranza, all those doors that thanks to Girolamo Fortezza opened wide for you, will finally and inexorably close. The world, you can be sure, will judge your shameful behavior. *(He waits for a reaction from GUGLIELMO. It doesn’t come; and so LA SPINA turns around and leaves.)*

GUGLIELMO *(He gets up in a hurry, gets to the doorway and looks outside, making sure that FURIO has left. When he is sure, he rushes towards center stage and talks directly to the audience, while the black velvet curtain closes behind his back.)* That miserable rat and dirty scandalmonger! What does my father-in-law have to do with the success of my career? The fact that I slapped my wife in front of Bonaria is between my wife and me. How can the world dare to judge certain personal facts that have to do only with my family? If I have to wash my dirty linen in public, then bring them on by all means. You were all here when I said: “If they push me into a corner I’ll tell you everything, the long and the short of it.” They did and and so I owe it to you to give you an explanation: truth and clarity. And in the end, pity, at least from you. *(The velvet curtain opens, showing the living room of the Speranza household. GIGLIOLA is sitting on the couch. She is very composed but vigilant and watching)*

Here is Gigliola and here’s what happened six years ago. *(After a short silence, touching his brow so as if to remember that talk between himself and his wife he pulls up a chair and sits in front of GIGLIOLA)* Well?

GIGLIOLA Whatever you say, Gugliè. I’m tired, exhausted. For six months you have been questioning me incessantly without any pity for me, my physical state, my pride, my dignity. And your questions were often
offensive, hateful. Whatever you want… but we must find a way out of this.

GUGLIELMO  The fact is that we got lost in unimportant things; we’ve never had the courage to tell each other the truth.

GIGLIOLA  You made me tell you the truth, crushing all the lies I had told you so as to avoid a drastic resolution that would ruin our family.

GUGLIELMO  Don’t you understand that in the beginning for fear of a reality that would have destroyed me both as an individual and as a man, I hung on to your lies as though they were sacred truth?

GIGLIOLA  Please! Do you know what the sacred truth is? That if you had accepted those lies as truths not only would I have admired you but I would have had time to get over this “fling” of mine that had all the extenuating circumstances and I would have really fallen in love with you.

GUGLIELMO  Of course, your friends…

GIGLIOLA  The usual excuse “my friends.” My friends have nothing to do with it, especially the one you accuse the most vehemently.

GUGLIELMO  *(With prejudice, his eyes becoming darker)* Countess Maria delle Grazie Filippetti Ullèra…

GIGLIOLA  You’re being unfair. That good lady always spoke well of you.
GUGLIELMO Of course… that was the best way to make her poisonous tales credible.

GIGLIOLA She had no reason to tell tales. She would always say: “Be careful, think of your husband: good or bad, hold on to him.”

GUGLIELMO Good or bad?

GIGLIOLA Of course, she would make me reflect on the fact that I had two children, that a mistake could ruin me, that I should be patient.

GUGLIELMO What did you have to be patient for? What mistreatment did you have to stand for?

GIGLIOLA Gugliè, you left me alone for months at a time, with a house to run, with the desperation of two children to bring up.

GUGLIELMO Always because of my work, and always unwillingly. And there were many reasons I couldn’t take you with me. When I left things were going fine, when I came back I would always find an unhappy surprise. Didn’t you have the children baptized and confirmed when I was gone for a month and a half?

GIGLIOLA So according to you those two children should have grown up like beasts?

GUGLIELMO Oh, yes, didn’t I tell you what kind of education I wanted for my children? Didn’t I tell you I would rather die than impose on my
children all those things my parents imposed on me without letting me choose?

GIGLIOLA When one is engaged one says so many things that seem easily possible, but then marriage brings you down to earth and you become practical and clearheaded. Why don’t you ever become practical? Always a chorus of relatives, close friends, dear friends, simple acquaintances... all saying the same thing: “Haven’t you had these children baptized yet? Nor confirmed?” When the kind lady Maria delle Grazie Fillipetti Ullèra found out that Fortunato and Felice were not baptized she became pale. She was shaking, the poor woman. “You know if those two children, God forbid, should die, they would have no right to heaven and they would be suspended in limbo forever.” She would cry when she told me this. Poor Maria delle Grazie!

GUGLIELMO What did she care about what happened to Fortunato and Felice after death this Maria delle Grazie? What if reaching adulthood they decided they wanted to run the risk of being suspended in limbo? How dare she, this Maria delle Grazie, put a limit on the adventurous spirit of mankind? We had agreed when we were engaged, hadn’t we? If we wanted to change our minds we were supposed to discuss it together. Let’s say that Felice and Fortunato on becoming adults had said to me: “Papa, we didn’t want to be baptized, have communions or be confirmed.” How could I undo what was done? I wanted them to choose for themselves, once they got old enough. Christ was baptized at thirty. Why such a hurry for our children? Why does this Maria delle Grazie dare control what happens in my house and what will happen in the future homes of my children?
You see, that’s your problem: you’re overbearing. Your insistence on belaboring this same subject has brought us to this point, this standstill. And it’s not only about the baptism and the confirmation that we got to this point but for many other things that had to go exactly the way you wanted them to, without wanting to admit that I too was in your life, with ideas different from yours I’ll admit but just because of this I had the right to speak my mind and express my feelings, if contradictory open to discussion. Instead no: everything had to begin and end the way you wanted it to.

Everything, instead had to begin and end the way others wanted it to, including the reaction that separated you from me definitively.

One could go crazy speaking to oneself.

But one recovers one’s wits easily speaking with an unfortunate, old love made up of pity, tenderness and nostalgia for the “incomplete” for what could have been but never was…

(Breaking in exasperatedly) One will do anything to get out of a mud puddle.

One gets out of a mud puddle only to get into bed.

It only happened to me once to get into bed.

(With bitterness) Only once…

(Indifferently) I repeat, only once…
**GUGLIELMO** *(As above)* Of course…

**GIGLIOLA** *(Nastily)* Yes, unfortunately only once, Gugliè. When it’s right, that one time is enough to last a lifetime.

**GUGLIELMO** And why didn’t it continue?

**GIGLIOLA** I have two children, he has three.

**GUGLIELMO** *(Wounded mortally, after a long pause)* How, how could we have two children…

**GIGLIOLA** *(Viciously)* When you have nothing to say in bed, you make children…

**AMNERIS** *(Coming in)* Lunch is ready. The cook has made Sicilian style pasta with eggplants on top. I am going to eat it too. I’m breaking my diet once and for all. Anyway, whether I stay on it or not I’m not going to be alive for much longer.

**GIGLIOLA** I am going to the table. Are you coming?

**GUGLIELMO** I am eating out.

**GIGLIOLA** And what about tonight?

**GUGLIELMO** I’m coming home late. Just leave me something.
(Indifferently) Okay.

(Sweetly, narrowing her eyes to slits) Are you going out?

I am going out.

(To her daughter) He’s going out.

He’s going out. (She moves off.)

(As above) Excuse me. (She also goes out.)

(A long silence follows, he gets up and moves toward center stage; after a sweeping look around the theatre he addresses the audience with a tired and misty tone) Anyway, the years went by just the same… (After a short pause, during which he doesn’t move, his eyes fixed on the audience his voice imploring) Mercy! Mercy! Mercy! (Going out into the wings he repeats) Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!

(The black curtain closes. Twenty-two years have passed. The singer with the guitar crosses the stage singing a hit song from 1957; the girl goes out, a dining room can be seen with a table and six chairs in the middle where FORTUNATO, GIGLIOLA, and GUGLIELMO’s first born, is sitting. The young man is busy reading the editorial page of a newspaper. After a short pause, VITTORINA, his wife appears from the wings; a bell ringing from the inside can be heard.)

Here they are. (Going towards the table) Get up, Fortunà, don’t let them find you seated at the table.
FORTUNATO Do you think I should be so formal with my brother and his wife?
(But he does get up and leaves the table.)

FELICE (From the doorway, FELICE is preceded by VITTORINA followed by his wife, ROSA) You must excuse us. We’re a little late because of our little one. Good day.

FORTUNATO Hi.

(The sisters-in-law hug each other.)

ROSA Now she’s old enough to understand. When she sees me with my hat on, she knows I’m going out and she makes such a scene, a revolution.

VITTORINA You told me that the new baby-sitter Carolina likes the child and the child likes her.

FELICE To play with, to go out for a walk or to school, but when she goes to bed she wants her mother near the bed.

ROSA And Carolina gets annoyed because she’s jealous. I brought you flowers.

VITTORINA How sweet of you.

FORTUNATO Shall we go to the table?
FELICE Are you hungry? I am too.

VITTORINA I had a ramakin of pasta with little meatballs and mozzarella and peas prepared especially for you… the cook makes it very deliciously.

FORTUNATO Well then let’s go to the table! Everybody to the table!

VITTORINA I’m going to the kitchen for a moment.

FELICE The hostess has to add the final touch.

VITTORINA (Joking) The magic touch. Just a minute. You all sit down in the meantime. (She goes out.)

FORTUNATO My sister-in-law is next to me. (As soon as the three are seated the bell rings a long ring) Imagine if the doorbell didn’t have to come to the table along with us!

FELICE There are two bells that come to the table with us uninvited. The doorbell and the telephone.

VITTORINA Come in, Mamma!

FELICE (Surprised by this unusual visit) Mamma?

ROSA Were you expecting her?
GIGLIOLA  (She comes in followed by VITTORINA) Good afternoon. You were eating. I’m sorry. But it’s important and urgent or I wouldn’t have come to bother you at lunchtime. Where could I go? Who could I confide in? You know I have no one. It’s about your father. Listen to what he’s come up with… three months ago he came to me with a complicated deal, investments…. He said that it was the right time to take the helm of the financial affairs of the family…. But since I know that when he begins talking he never stops, I always said: “yes, yes, okay,” thinking about something else and when he was through talking I understood nothing of what he said. But this time there must be something to it, because time passes and he continues to speak about taking the helm and what direction the financial ship is going in. His insistence made me suspicious, and got my attention. I listened carefully to what he was saying and finally understood what he had in mind. He’s crazy; he’s completely lost his mind. He wants to make a big investment in a deal that, according to him will make him earn millions in a few years, and to do it he wants to sell the property.

VITTORINA & ROSA

(Together) He wants to sell?

VITTORINA  And what property does he want to sell?

GIGLIOLA  I don’t know and I don’t want to know. He mustn’t touch a stone of what goes to my children after my death. (The doorbell rings) It’s him! A poor girl marries to free herself from her family and she
slowly finds an even more annoying one. My goodness, I can’t believe you escape one hell only to find yourself in another!

(The bell rings again.)

VITTORINA I’ll go to answer it. (She goes out.)

ROSA If it’s Papa, his children are here too, so we can clear up the matter.

VITTORINA Come in, Papa.

GUGLIELMO I came at lunchtime, I’m sorry…

VITTORINA We invited Rosa and Felice to lunch, and then Mamma came…

GUGLIELMO We ruined your day, but I really had to finish the conversation Gigliola and I started.

GIGLIOLA We’ll finish it another time because the children are just sitting down to lunch. Goodbye and have a nice lunch.

VITTORINA Wait, Mamma. If it’s important isn’t it better that you finish it right away.

FORTUNATO If you wish we’ll leave you alone.
GUGLIELMO Why? We have to speak about something that has to do mainly with you, so it’s best that you stay so that you can give your opinion and we can all come to an agreement.

FORTUNATO If that’s the case…

GUGLIELMO Your mother must have said something about it.

FORTUNATO Actually no. I did get the impression that she wanted to say something but then you arrived.

GUGLIELMO Gigliò, I’d like to know why you got so mad and left as soon as I brought up the subject. We’ve been talking about this for more than three months…

GIGLIOLA You, you’ve been talking about it, not me. I let you talk as much as you wanted to because I was sure that in time you would open your eyes and reason. But as usual, you just went on and on. Well, beware; if you think I’m going to let you ruin the family you’re wrong! Before that happens I’ll call my lawyers and you’ll get over that desire to be a megalomaniac. And remember, the law will be on my side. A good mother – as a matter of fact, a grandmother, because we have two grandchildren – a good mother has an obligation to defend her children and grandchildren’s interests!

GUGLIELMO And haven’t I worked a lifetime for our home? Didn’t I give all that I earned to the family?
GIGLIOLA Well, the money, the house, the furniture, the jewels… you can’t do what you want with all of this because it’s no longer yours: it belongs to the family!

GUGLIELMO (He speaks to the children, who have kept a neutral, passive stance from the beginning, at times by looking at the ceiling, at others by staring at the floor, and other times by fixing their tie without ever siding with either their mother or their father.) I hope you realize that your mother has completely lost her mind…. (FORTUNATO stares at the ceiling, FELICE the floor.) The fact is that she refuses to understand what I have been explaining to her for the last three months.

GIGLIOLA Something is wrong. You’re not telling the whole story, Gugliè. While I’m alive, I swear to God, you will sell nothing, not even a pin from our house; you will not touch one single brick of the property!

GUGLIELMO It’s all mine and I’ll sell it all if I want to!

GIGLIOLA I object. The lawyer has already briefed me on what I should do. I’ll have you committed. Your children will sign too. And if they don’t want to, Vittorina and Rosa, your daughters-in-law, will convince them to. Good day to everybody. (She goes out.)

GUGLIELMO And you two would dare to sign such a defamatory declaration against your father?

FORTUNATO Here we go again: you and Mamma always making a tragedy over nothing. No one here has decided to do any such thing as damage
you morally. It’s a matter of speaking, clearing things up and coming to an agreement.

FELICE As far as I am concerned, if I have to tell the truth, I’ve never seen Mamma so angry.

GUGLIELMO Because her parents brought her up in a very protected environment, breathing only air of well being and tranquillity without ever knowing where this air came from. Naturally now she refuses to understand. Am I right? (He waits for an answer from his sons or his daughters-in-law but none comes) I’ve tried to persuade her in a million ways, with patience, kindness but nothing would convince her to listen to me. Does her attitude seem fair? And it’s not a day or two; it has been months, years that your mother fights me. (Not even this time do the sons and the daughters-in-law bat an eye; finally GUGLIELMO bursts out) Children, I can’t continue to talk alone like a crazy person. You must express yourselves either favorably or not.

FORTUNATO Papa how can we have an opinion if we don’t know all the facts?

GUGLIELMO Didn’t you hear your mother say that she wants to get your signature along with hers to have me committed?

FELICE We understood that. Now, we’d like to know what it is that Mamma refuses to understand.

VITTORINA Excuse me, Felice, it’s useless to pass responsibility back and forth. Mamma spoke very clearly just now: she’s made that decision based on what Papa said about needing funds for a plan that he has and why he intended to sell the property.
And naturally there was a family meeting.

No, because while we were talking you came in.

On the other hand, we knew the whole story because the news came from another source. There really wasn’t a need for a family meeting because everybody spoke up together: “Please, it’s a terrible deal! Talk him out of it! You’ll risk ending up in the poorhouse!” That kind lady, Maria delle Grazie…

Filippetti Ullèra…

Yes, that’s the one. We really consider her the guardian angel of our house.

How can a poor man defend himself against these guardian angels that come out of your ears, nose and eyes and that do not confront you openly but wage war behind your back? (A short pause) And if I sell?

You must decide.

I am decided.

I am decided is not I have decided.

(With an outburst in crescendo) Go ahead and sign, get together as a group of delinquents and sign! Cut out my tongue, chop off my arms,
my legs… go ahead. I’ll defend myself and we’ll see who wins in the end.

VITTORINA *(Bursting out herself)* Fortunà, speak up! Tell him to his face that your mother is right to act as she does a hundred times over and that all of us are as suspicious as she is to the reasons behind his hasty decision to sell!

GUGLIELMO Suspicious?

VITTORINA Yes, Papa!

GUGLIELMO Don’t call me Papa! Call me Thing, Stick, Flower-vase, Candleholder, anything but Papa.

FORTUNATO Instead we want to call you Papa with all the affection and love that the word itself means.

FELICE Also because, Papa you’re going through a difficult time, how can I say… a period?

ROSA Of confusion similar to…

FORTUNATO Yes. Like that time when there was so much trouble between you and Mamma over that girl from the perfume shop.

GUGLIELMO *(Sincerely confused)* The girl from the perfume shop…
VITTORINA  Bonaria.

GUGLIELMO  (This name pronounced with a sort of contempt comes at a moment of such bitterness towards this bunch instead of aggravating him strangely enough calms him down; just the mention of the name BONARIA goes through his veins like a balm of olive oil on a wound, that is still bleeding, his face relaxes, it becomes luminous, his eyes shine proudly, they become soft and after a long pause) Thank you, Vittorina, that’s the first time I hear a sweet and comforting word from you. Vittorina, right? I think that’s your name. B-o-n-a-r-i-a. (To FORTUNATO) You are wrong to think that I am going through a time that is like the one with the perfume girl… not because you wanted to look down on Bonaria writing her off as a “perfume” girl, but because you dared, naively, naturally, because you never met her… to confuse that time with Bonaria with this… (From this moment on the name BONARIA is pronounced syllable by syllable) Shall we sit down? (And he sits down at the center of the table, across from the audience; the two couples, fascinated by the quick change in his mood not to mention the sweetness in his tone of voice, without even realizing what they are doing, they sit down on either side.) BO-NA-RIA, she was the daughter of a the doorman of a big building dating back to the fifteenth century, above the Miracoli section of town. She never met her father; even her mother didn’t know who he was because she became pregnant with BO-NA-RIA going up and down the six floors of the building when she rang the bell of the various apartments to bring the tenants telegrams and special deliveries. The registered letters would arrive during the day, the telegrams even during the night. The letters were sealed and protected but who could protect a poor thing like her. Up the Miracoli neighborhood in a tenement area like that who could have taught BON-NA-RIA gentleness, kindness, her taste in dressing, the pureness of her feelings, pride, wisdom… who? A miracle up in the
Miracoli neighborhood…. I met her, “the perfume girl,” too late in my life. If by some miracle as a student I had lived up in the Miracoli neighborhood, and if miraculously the “perfume girl” had been born in time to meet up with me, a contemporary of mine, up there, you two instead of being born like pieces in a crossword puzzle, would have been small miracles. (Staring straight ahead into the emptiness)

Thank you, doorman’s daughter, “perfume girl,” Bo-na-ria… you are still the one to come to my aid. (The four, confused stare at GUGLIELMO analyzing his every movement.) You find me strange, extravagant, on the edge of insanity? A dreamer, perhaps, but we are all dreamers. Once I was at a dinner, held in honor of a very important man – more than one hundred guests – all the men present were in their fifties. After eating and drinking, one of the dinner guests proposed an innocent game: each one needed to reveal whether they had written a love poem as a young man and, if so, then recite it. Everyone had written youthful poems, beautiful even and each one recited parts or the whole poem. I also recited mine… but I’ll spare you, I don’t like it anymore. (A long silence) Don’t bother to gather the family together to decide about my destiny. I give up the idea of what I wanted to give our… oh… excuse me… your financial position. When I die I shall leave the inheritance intact, you children born from a crossword puzzle game shall divide it equally. And to please me… I said, pay attention, “to please me,” I did not say, “to please you”… to please me, I shall leave this world as soon as possible… I don’t intend to commit suicide, don’t worry… I don’t want to leave a defamatory mark on the family. Man knows he must die and there’s nothing he can do about it. He also knows he can’t slow down death; it’s true but he also knows with certainty that when he starts to live like a tree, when he spends the days in an armchair reading books and newspapers, the end cannot be far. One can die of books and newspapers. I won’t forbid you to pray for me, but I beg
you not to forbid me to pray for you. *(He gets up and starts to pray fervently)*

Hail Mary
Please do me the favor:
Bring these people with you
You will be blessed amongst women
If you do this.
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb
Jesus
Holy Mary
If you are truly the Mother of God,
Pray for us,
So that we may be sinners
Now
And at the hour of our death.
Amen!

*(GUGLIELMO comes to the center of the stage, stops, and stares at the audience intently.)*

*(The two couples in the meantime exit from the two side wings.)*

*(From inside the voice of the guitarist strumming on the guitar can be heard. She is singing the last big success from 1972. Many things are happening at this point in the play. The director must coordinate these various movements of the play as he sees fit. GUGLIELMO takes off the gray beard and puts on the white one; while putting it on his face changes expression, assuming an ambiguous grimace, while he remains still even more than before and stares at the audience. The*
dining room of VITTORINA and FORTUNATO is removed and a velvet black curtain comes down. The crew places a large armchair in front of this curtain. A book is on the chair. The director will choose the position of the chair. The singer crosses the stage singing. When she reaches the wings, GUGLIELMO goes to the armchair, takes up the book, sits down, and starts to leaf through the pages of the book as the singer leaves the scene.)

(Slowly, the curtain comes down on the “second act.”)
Act Three

On the Chance-meeting Street. GIGLIOLA appears from the wings. The signs of a long-endured physical tiredness and a look of uncertainty due to events that have befallen her are evident. She runs to center stage and addresses the audience as one who has an urgent message to pass on.

GIGLIOLA Please forgive me for showing up like this, I look like a maid! But I didn’t even have time to comb my hair and put something decent on. On the other hand, I wouldn’t have had the courage or the strength to do it. Guglielmo! (In uttering this she breaks into a cry that is sincere only in its volume, length, and the traditional tone proper to those moments of sorrow that have been occurring for millions of years) Guglielmo is not well! He has not been well for quite a time but now he just got worse. I know he used to confide often in you and so I thought to do the same and tell you how things went from the day he became ill to how they are now that he got worse. (Suddenly, in a tragic tone) Guglielmo, my Guglielmo! You cannot leave me, you cannot abandon a poor woman alone, without the comfort of someone dear… Guglielmo, do not leave me! I don’t want to dwell on the horrible days I am going through nor on those even worse that are approaching. But I want to tell you about him and I want to do that in a hurry because, believe me, lately, when I have to leave him to run an errand or to buy something necessary, all the while I’m out I am obsessed by the thought: “Now I’ll return home, and I’ll find the gate to the building half closed in sign of mourning for Guglielmo!” And sometimes, to free myself from this nightmare, sometimes… (She presses her fist to the center of the forehead) Ah, how I would like to not be misunderstood, but to be shown consideration and compassion. (She stretches her right arm towards the public) Is it true that you won’t misunderstand me? That you’ll show
compassion? Is it true? *(With her head lifted high, heroically)* To get rid of this nightmare, sometimes I really wish I’d find that half gate closed. Because, to find it closed, would mean the end to his sufferings and the beginning of coming to terms. *(Suddenly, she gives in to inconsolable despair)* It is so true that only when you’re faced with the irreparable, you’re able to find yourself and finally recognize the true values in life! And Guglielmo and I found ourselves.... We finally speak to each other, we listen. I talk, talk, talk.... And he does too. Of course, he speaks as best he can. He speaks with whatever breath he has left, but we understand each other. But why, why on this earth, can you understand each other only when you’re about to die? During the fifteen years that he stayed away from you, there have not been any significant events. After giving up on that financial project… remember the fight there was among him, the children and me? Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so decidedly hostile on that occasion… I regret it because from that very moment his enthusiasm cooled off and his life became monotonous and sedentary: newspapers and books, books and newspapers. And that is how he became ill. What is his illness? Who knows! He doesn’t want to see a doctor. He wants to be treated by the veterinarian. In the family we all insisted on a specialist, a professor with a good reputation: nothing doing! “I want the veterinarian.” “But why?” we asked. He said that he does not want to share with the doctor the credit for having been cured nor the blame for his death. He said that the veterinarian, when he visits a donkey, doesn’t even think of asking him: “Does it hurt here when you breathe?” “Do you feel pain when I press here?” “When you wake up in the morning, do you feel dizzy?” “Do you eat with appetite?” and “How is your digestion?”… Believe me, he is insane. Guglielmo is insane! Today, there will be a conference. Three famous professors, three authorities in the medical profession will come to see him. But I have no hope… He’ll refuse to show them his tongue, to hold his
breath, to breathe in and out and say “Ahhh!” Guglielmo’s present state is hopeless. He does not speak anymore, he stutters; he barely sees; he does not listen, because he keeps muttering to himself. *(Losing patience) Eeeeh! It isn’t easy, believe me. It is not easy to assist someone who is dying.* *(Underlining this specific detail) Someone dying who, of course, belongs to you. Excuse me; I have to run, to run home.* *(Imploring at the sky with arms stretched out) Almighty God, I implore you, let me find the gate half closed!* *(She realizes her mistake, but, without missing a beat, she corrects herself) Sorry, I meant, let me find the gate wide open… *(She exits.)*

*(Once GIGLIOLA exits, FURIO walks in from the wing. The years have done their work and he looks old and bent. His clothes are worn thin and it’s clear that he is not doing so well. He walks slowly and he talks to himself: perhaps he is talking badly of someone… From the opposite side, there appears GIACINTO CHIARASTELLA. He is the doorman of the building where the Fortezzas used to live and where now, already for quite some time, GUGLIELMO and GIGLIOLA live. GIACINTO walks fast and he is carrying some medicines. It’s FURIO who first recognizes the old porter while behind them the black velvet curtain is drawn close.)*

**FURIO** *(Glad to have met the right person with whom he can gossip)*

Chiarastella! Giacinto Chiarastella!

**GIACINTO** *(By nature suspicious)*

Who is it?

**FURIO**

What do you mean “Who is it?” Don’t you remember me? Aren’t you the doorman of the building where for so many years the Fortezza family lived and now the Speranza family lives?
GIACINTO  *(Recognizing him)*  La Spina! Are you the young La Spina?

FURIO  Have I changed so much that you did not recognize me?

GIACINTO  No… You haven't changed; it’s me who has grown old, not you. I did not expect to see you dressed so sloppily. Please forgive me, but when you used to visit the Speranza family, all the tenants in the building, called you “the young lord.” Tell me the truth, things haven't been going well?

FURIO  Ups and downs, dear Giacinto Chiarastè. In life, you need luck. If I too had met a Gigliola Fortezza, I wouldn’t dress sloppily.

GIACINTO  You mean don Guglielmo? Poor man, now he is in bad shape.

FURIO  *(Poisonously interested)*  He is not well?

GIACINTO  You don’t know anything?

FURIO  No.

GIACINTO  He is in really in bad shape. I go and come from the pharmacy. *(Showing the packets he is carrying)* these drugs are for him. Today, some doctors will hold a consultation. Come and see him before he loses consciousness, I’m sure he’ll be pleased.
FURIO Yes, yes, as soon as I can. (He writes his address on a page torn from a notebook.) Should anything happen, even if it’s at night, you can reach me here. (He gives him the note.)

GIACINTO Rest assured. Now I’ll have to go because Signora Gigliola is waiting for the medications. Have a nice day.

FURIO You too.

(They go out.)

(The black velvet curtain opens revealing the living room of the Speranza’s apartment. GUGLIELMO is still stretched out on an armchair, head propped up on pillows; the room is in utter and unusual disorder: there are piles of books and newspapers strewn on the floor around GUGLIELMO. During the next scene, all GUGLIELMO’s relatives that we will see coming in, will appear tired and overcome by that mental and moral fatigue which is typical of those who for too long have been forced to take turns by the bed of a seriously ill relative who has no hope of recovery. Trepidation and apprehension can be felt through the traffic in the rooms of the apartment and the living room; from the kitchen, the noise of running water in the sink and plates being stacked, the loud crack of plates falling and breaking; from the other rooms, the sound of quick steps and of doors being slammed. From time to time, members of the family, including GIGLIOLA and the MAID, hurry across the living room, one with a pile of just pressed laundry, one with a fresh pillow case to put on the pillow where GUGLIELMO has been resting his head. The two women take care of that replacement, however so hastily that in performing the task GUGLIELMO’s head falls now on
the right now on the left. It is now GIGLIOLA’s turn; she is searching through a pile of medications on a table next to GUGLIELMO, finds a bottle of pills, which has to be of a color not easily mistaken, opens it, takes out three pills – exactly three – and puts them in the mouth of her husband helping him to swallow them with a glass of water. This gesture, which the woman carries out habitually and almost without thinking, and the difficulty the man has in swallowing, cause the water to overflow and run down the chin, the throat, and into the collar of the nightgown, now much too large for that long suffering neck. GIGLIOLA however does not notice it and continues to pour water without paying attention to the twisting of the man when the cold liquid goes down on his chest and stomach. Having fulfilled her duty, with complete indifference GIGLIOLA puts the bottle back with the other medicines, puts the glass still with water in it next to them and quickly goes into the kitchen. From the opposite side comes ROSA. She approaches the table, selects the same bottle just used by GIGLIOLA, picks up the glass with the remaining water, and for GUGLIELMO the torture of the three pills, the water and the twisting is repeated. Completed her inopportune task, ROSA exits taking with her the empty glass.)

(Other members of the family going and coming, doing things not too different from what has just been described or that can be invented by the director keeping in mind that, generally, what one does for seriously ill people is dictated more by the desire to do something than by true thoughtfulness towards the person. A ring at the door. Shortly afterwards, the MAID enters followed by VALENTINO, the trusted family barber. He carries a small box with all that’s needed for a shave and a haircut.)
(Announcing towards the rest of the apartment) Valentino is here.
(After a pause) Valentino the barber is here!

(Finally the inhabitants of the house hear the announcement and now the relatives start coming from the different rooms, curious and interested like when one is getting ready for an unusual event. The first to arrive is ROSA.)

ROSA  
(With familiarity) What’s up, Valentino.

VALENTINO Signora Rosa, my respects.

ROSA  
(Pointing towards GUGLIELMO) So is it going to be a shave?

VALENTINO I don’t know. Let see what Signora Gigliola has to say.

VITTORINA  
(Entering and addressing FORTUNATO who follows her) Papa is going to be shaved. Come, Fortunato.

FORTUNATO But I don’t understand. Somebody who has had a beard all his life, from one moment to the next he shaves it?

FELICE  
(Entering) He’s shaved it already?

ROSA No, he still has it.

VALENTINO I just walked in this minute, how could I have shaved it?
PORTER Valentino, see if you can’t convince him not to have it cut.

VITTORINA I say that from a hygienic point of view it’s better to shave it.

ROSA But excuse me, after months and months spent either in bed or in this armchair, thin and weak as he is now, his friends who come to see him, won’t even recognize him

VITTORINA Let’s do as Valentino says: let’s see what Mamma says.

FORTUNATO Whether you cut it off or not, afterwards, would you please give me a trim because lately I have really neglected my hair?

FELICE I need a trim too. Just a minor thing.

VALENTINO It’s all the same to me, but I’d say leave your hair the way it is now. If people see you with a fresh haircut, they’ll say (stressing the words): “With their father in such a condition, they even found time to get a haircut!”

GIGLIOLA (Walking in) No time to do anything, not a moment of peace. I was barely able to sip some coffee and milk, and I had to put the cup down.

MAID I’ll fetch it for you. (She walks out.)
GIGLIOLA Valentino, if you’re going to cut that beard you better hurry up because in half an hour Professor Nero is coming with two specialists for a consultation.

VALENTINO It only takes me five, six minutes for a beard (opening his bag).

GIGLIOLA Wait. (Addressing the husband with a voice slightly louder and stressing every word as one does when one wants to be understood by a person who is in critical conditions and whose mind is already confused) Guglielmo, Guglielmo… Valentino is here… do you remember Valentino? (GUGLIELMO, however, has his wits about him more than anyone can imagine and could even speak coherently, if it suited him; this time, though, he prefers to answer with a nod of his head.) You can’t speak? (Again, a nod from GUGLIELMO) Last night we talked at length, you answered so well… are you tired? (GUGLIELMO nods) It’s okay, rest now because later you’ll have to answer all the questions that Professor Nero and the two specialists will ask you (GUGLIELMO smiles and moves his head as if to say “Yes, yes”) so, you have decided, right? You want to shave it off? (GUGLIELMO nods and then, with a sign, clearly shows what he thinks on the subject) All right, then. As you wish. (Turning to the others, especially the barber) It’s better if he has it shaved off. He complains that it bothers him even on the rare occasions he manages to fall asleep.

VALENTINO Let’s get on with it then! (As if to view an unusual show, all the relatives led by ROSA, who is the quickest to secure the best seat, sit around the patient in the chair. VALENTINO in the bat of an eye has unfolded his towel and with short steps and, with movements reminiscent of the most difficult moments of Figaro shaving Don Bartolo, finally is behind GUGLIELMO, lets the immaculately white
rectangle of his towel fly from left to right around GUGLIELMO’s head, and adjusts it around his thin neck. Then, putting on a plainly spurious festive air, he faces his customer in the certainty that he won’t find any opposition) Don Gugliè, you look great. The last time I saw you, when I came to trim your beard, about ten days ago, I found you looking much worse than now. You have bloomed.

(The MAID comes in carrying a tray with a cup of milk and coffee, and two packets of crackers on a tray. Nobody turns down the crackers; GIGLIOLA dips one in her cup. Even VALENTINO, encouraged on by GIGLIOLA and ROSA, takes one.)

GIGLIOLA This is what we’re reduced to now.

ROSA Coffee with milk, two boiled or fried eggs....

GIGLIOLA No more regular meals.

VALENTINO And how can one think of meals?

GIGLIOLA There is no time.

VITTORINA The entire family mobilized around him.

VALENTINO (Nonchalantly, to the MAID) Young lady, will you please bring a basin with water.

MAID Right away. (She goes out.)
VALENTINO  
*(Addressing GUGLIELMO)* First we’ll trim it a bit, then we’ll use the razor.

(At the very moment that the barber starts with the scissors, somebody rings the doorbell.)

MAID  
I’ll get the door and then I’ll go for the water.

VALENTINO  
There is no hurry *(Turning to GUGLIELMO’s relatives and showing the scissors)* Shall I go ahead or wait?

GIGLIOLA  
Why do you want to wait?

VALENTINO  
Just in case some other relative arrives who'd like to see for the last time Guglielmo with a beard.

(Preceded by the MAID, who crosses the stage to reach the kitchen, *Dr AUGUSTO SAMPIERO* enters. *He is the vet who has assisted GUGLIELMO from the very beginning. As if he is one of the family he gives a general greeting.*)

SAMPIERO  
Good day. *(They all answer his greeting.)* Don Guglielmo, I see that you summoned the barber for a shave. I am very glad because it shows you feel better.

GIGLIOLA  
Doctor, it’s not that he feels better. *(Under her breath)* Actually, it seems to me that he is not better but worse. Valentino, hurry up, let’s not waste time in talking.
VALENTINO I am ready! *(During the following scene, he trims, cuts, soaps, and shaves the beard.)*

SAMPIERO *(To GIGLIOLA, on the side)* To tell you the truth, I got a little scared when I found your phone message at the studio: “Come immediately, your presence is urgently needed.”

*(All the relatives gather around the doctor and GIGLIOLA.)*

GIGLIOLA Doctor, you are a superb veterinarian and nobody questions that. My husband from the very beginning wanted you to take care of him and you are doing that.

SAMPIERO Just a minute, please: before being a veterinarian, I have been a devoted friend of Don Guglielmo. I have taken care of all the dogs, cats, and parrots of the Speranza family; I am devoted to this family and that is why I consented to comfort Don Guglielmo, but I never claimed to treat him. As they say, I did, as they wanted me to do. What can I say, having followed him from the very beginning of this crisis, is that Guglielmo Speranza is as fit as a fiddle.

GIGLIOLA And that is why I sent for you with such urgency.

SAMPIERO I don’t understand....

FORTUNATO Go on Mamma, tell him. What are you waiting for?

ROSA Doctor, the fact is that today there will be a consultation.
FELICE They are three professors.

GIGLIOLA They will have to be brought up to date on the patient’s history ... what medicines he has been taking until now....

SAMPiero I understand, it is my duty. And then, among veterinarians we’ll find a common language.

(The relatives exchange embarrassed looks among themselves; ROSA takes the lead)

ROSA The fact is that I don’t think these three professors will want to talk to you.

SAMPiero Why?

FELICE Doctor, these three professors are not veterinarians.

VITTORINA They are three eminent scientists.

SAMPiero But if these three professors will not want to talk to me, then I have no interest in talking to them.

ROSA As a friend of the family....

GIGLIOLA You do not need to mention that you are a veterinarian.
ALL TOGETHER  There is no need.

SAMIERO  Absolutely not! If you force me to speak to these three “wizards” of medicine, I shall do it after properly introducing myself and handing out my visiting card with addresses, telephone numbers, and my qualifications of veterinary doctor!

VALENTINO  *(At this moment, with the agility of a dancer, he makes a half turn and is behind GUGLIELMO, pulls from his neck the white towel and lets it fly to the floor, then announces)*  There you are. The beard is gone! *(He places the mirror in the hands of the client, takes the customary step back and waits for expected sign of approval.)*

MAID  *(Entering)*  Professor Nero is here. Two other professors are with him.

GIGLIOLA  *(Ready and well informed)*  Rosso and Bianco. They came for the consultation.

VALENTINO  *(Having secured his tools in the bag, respectfully bows to take his leave from the family)*  Good day. Later on, if you don't mind, I'll come back to find out about Don Guglielmo. *(He leaves.)*

GIGLIOLA  *(To the MAID)*  Show in Professor Rosso, Bianco, e Nero.

MAID  Yes. *(She goes out; the whole family assumes an official and doleful air, appropriate for the occasion, and gathers round the sick one. The MAID re-entering)*  Please come in.
(The three eminent doctors: BIANCO, ROSSO, and NERO make their entrance.)

FORTUNATO  (Speaking to the professors) I’ll show you the way.

NERO  (With a half smile) Show us.

ROSSO  Show us, show us....

BIANCO  Show us....

NERO  (Toward the relatives) My respects....

ROSSO & NERO  Our respects.

FORTUNATO  (Introducing GIGLIOLA to the three professors) Signora Gigliola, the wife of the patient. (Including FELICE with his gesture) Our mother.

GIGLIOLA  (With a trembling voice, stretching a hand toward the three) Honored... (Pointing to ROSA and VITTORIA) My daughters-in-law.

(Slight bow from the doctors)

FORTUNATO  (Pointing to FELICE) My brother.

(The heads of FORTUNATO and FELICE, at the same time as those of the three scientists, make a rapid and masculine nod.)
GIGLIOLA (Pointing to GUGLIELMO) My husband, the patient.

(The three professors observe GUGLIELMO from afar, for just a moment, then they nod their heads quickly, as though to say: “He’s in good hands now.”)

FORTUNATO (Pointing to SAMPIERO) Doctor August Sampiero.

BIANCO His general practitioner?

GIGLIOLA Precisely.

THE THREE PROFESSORS

(With a slight nod of the head) Colleague....

SAMPIERO (Instinctively) No, actually, I ...

GIGLIOLA (To the MAID) Chairs, please. (To the doctors) Please have a seat.

BIANCO As far away as possible from the patient. (The family, helped by the MAID, places the chairs far away from GUGLIELMO, the three scientists begin conferring among themselves, then BIANCO speaks to SAMPIERO, who has remained standing away from the others.) Dear colleague, before interrogating the patient, we would like you, professor ...

GIGLIOLA (Quickly interrupts) Doctor, Doctor August Sampiero ...
BIANCO  We would like you, doctor, to recount more or less the development of the sickness and his current state.

SAMPIERO  Most illustrious professors, it is my duty to immediately clarify that I am not a doctor, but a veterinarian. When the Speranza family called me, I came immediately never imagining that the husband of Signora Gigiola would be my patient. And I didn’t treat him; I had neither the obligation nor the right. I stayed near him to comfort him, I never signed any prescriptions. The family upon advice of friends and neighbors has administered all the medicines he has been given. You must realize my embarrassment, most illustrious professors and how it is impossible for me to relate to you the development of his sickness. You will be the best judge. As for me, I have fulfilled my duties as friend. Good day. (He exits.)

GIGLIOLA  (Mortified) Please forgive us, professors.

FORTUNATO  Forgive this outburst.

(BIANCO, waiting for one of his colleagues to speak up first, smiles enigmatically.)

NERO  (As the most senior it is his duty to speak first) Do not worry, Signora Speranza. Science will do everything in its power to give your husband new vigor. Now it is necessary to ask the patient a few questions.

GIGLIOLA  It is useless, illustrious professor: he won’t answer. That is why he requested a veterinarian, to not be interrogated.
FORTUNATO  He won’t answer.

FELICE  He won’t answer.

NERO  Excuse me, but is he mute?

GIGLIOLA  Not at all, he can speak well.

ROSSO  And so?

FELICE  He refuses to collaborate with doctors ...

FORTUNATO  He claims that the veterinarian can treat the sick without having to interrogate them ...

FELICE  And that, after all, he is not so different from an animal ...

NERO  Very rational: does he admit to being rational?

GIGLIOLA  Yes, but he says that is precisely the reason which has brought him to the conclusion that doctors should consult other doctors, not the patient ...

(A long silence follows during which the doctors exchange meaningful, barely tolerant looks; finally NERO makes up his mind.)
Well, colleagues, let me have a look. *(He gets up and goes toward GIGLIOLA.)*

*(The two colleagues follow him. The relatives also stand up on their tiptoes and have regrouped to a spot in the living room from where they can view better the actions of the doctors and the reactions of the patient. GUGLIELMO is amused by everything that is happening around him, and he voluntarily participates in the examination; it reminds him in an astoundingly similar manner to the simulated farcical one improvised by his university friends on the day he graduated, that he was forced to participate in for the sake of tradition. The medical examination must be minimal and quick: listening to his heart, measuring his blood-pressure, tapping the hammer just below his knee to test his reflexes. The doctors’ most attentive moment will be when each in turn observes the dilation of his pupils. Neither from the three doctors’ expressions, whether alarmed or optimistic, nor from their gestures, discouraged or hopeful, will it be possible to assess the gravity of GUGLIELMO’s sickness. Finally NERO, followed by ROSSO and BIANCO will move away from GUGLIELMO and reach the group of relatives.)*

*(Toward GIGLIOLA)* Did he do his tests?

GIGLIOLA Certainly.

NERO I would like to see them.

FORTUNATO *(Showing a large quantity of analyses to the professor)* Here. Wasserman, urine, glycemia, azotemia.
NERO  (Reading briefly and passing on the papers to ROSSO) Yes... yes... yes...

ROSSO  (Reading) yes... yes... yes...

NERO  (Showing a paper to ROSSO) This is the sputum.

ROSSO  Yes... yes... yes. (They speak among themselves in an unintelligible manner.)

(GUGLIELMO straightens up to try and hear what the doctors are mumbling but their voices get mixed up with the recognizable ones of his former classmates playing the fake consultation years before.)

NERO  (Handing ROSSO another sheet of paper) The feces.

(The voice of FURIO, from a tape recorder, barges in, though barely audible to GUGLIELMO)

FURIO’s voice  You did the feces?

(And the tape continues repeating the scene from the Prologue with the voices of the actors who interpreted it while the three doctors play along with the dubbing by interpreting with appropriate gestures the words: “No, I didn’t do the feces,” “And who did the feces?” “And what is the prognosis? What do you think?” “What should we tell the family?”)
NERO  
(In a sad and very formal tone of voice) Signora ...

GIGLIOLA  
Tell me, tell me Professor.

NERO  
Obitus imminente. It’s a matter of hypersensitivity.... (The recording starts again, so that Nero's voice is once again dubbed by FURIO)

FURIO's voice  
Apoplectic homological pharmacological rectilinear psychic bowel laxative digestive ...

(The spoken recording ends here and the chorus of the students begins: “When will Daddy’s wire transfer arrive, the wire transfer!” Which will serve as the background to Nero’s diagnosis)

NERO  
If the patient had been turned over to physicians in good time, he would have received all possible cures medical science has to offer. Now it is too late. Now it all depends on the patient himself, it is he who has to react to the sickness. We will keep a constant vigil, we will check on him, follow him, have him constantly undergo strict tests and it is our wish that he overcomes this trial. (Taking their leave) Ladies and gentlemen, our respects.

(Repeated bows and handshakes; a hearty exchange of congratulations among the doctors. The student chorus ends as soon as the doctors leave. Only FORTUNATO leads the professors to the door and sees them off. The other members of the family gather in the center of the room asking each other about the incomprehensible response of Professor Nero. In the mean time, from the entrance, one can hear the voices of Mrs PICIOCCA and Mrs CUCURULLO, as well as the voice of a third person, COUNTESS MARIA DELLE GRAZIE FILIPPETTI)
ULLÈRA. The three ladies greet with deference the three professors coming out of the house at that moment.)

LADIES Our regards, Professors.

PROFESSORS Our respects, Ladies.

(One hears the front door closing at the back of the three physicians.)

FORTUNATO (Accompanying the three ladies into the room) Come in, mother is here. (Addressing GIGLIOLA) Mamma, Countess Filippetti Ullèra is also here.

ROSA (To VITTORINA) Maria of our graces! (She starts towards the entrance together with GIGLIOLA and VITTORINA, as the Countess enters, followed by PICIOCCCA, CUCURULLO and FORTUNATO.)

COUNTESS (Around sixty, silver haired with blue streaks, thin and pale, she seems dressed in mourning, a funereal expression on her face; upon seeing GIGLIOLA, she takes off to reach and embrace her) Dear ... poor and dear Gigliola!

GIGLIOLA (With deference letting herself be embraced by the noble woman) What comfort you give me, my Maria! Thanks for coming.

COUNTESS (In a patronizing tone) Sit down, my dear. (To the two ladies who came in with her) Let’s sit down, my little ones. (And they sit in the same spot where the conversation between the doctors and the family
took place in the preceding scene; hinting at GUGLIELMO, the COUNTESS asks GIGLIOLA) What about him?

PICIOCCA (Very interested) Yes, him?

CUCURULLO Him?

GIGLIOLA Just a moment. Let me see whether he is napping. (She reaches GUGLIELMO who immediately shuts his eyes when he sees that his wife is approaching. After perfunctorily observing her husband, GIGLIOLA tiptoes back towards her friends and reassures them) He fell asleep. God be praised.

FORTUNATO (After checking with his wife, his sister-in-law, and his brother) Mamma, maybe we'll go home, eat a bite, and come back. Anyway, now your friends are here to keep you company.

COUNTESS Yes, we are here now.

VITTORINA We’ll be back soon.

ROSA About a half an hour.

CUCURULLO Even an hour, two.

COUNTESS There is no need to hurry.

VITTORINA Thank you.
FELICE  At any rate, a telephone call, and we’ll be right back.

ROSA  *(To the Countess)* One is always on edge.

FORTUNATO  Let’s go then, let’s hurry up.

*(After goodbyes and handshakes the two couples leave.)*

COUNTESS  So, what do the doctors say?

GIGLIOLA  *(With trembling voice)* There is no hope.

PICIOCCA  Oh, my God!

CUCURULLO  Poor Guglielmo!

COUNTESS  I’d say, poor Gigliola! It is only a year that she lost her mother ...

CUCURULLO  Well, let’s be realistic, Signora Amneris had reached a respectable age.

PICIOCCA  How old was she?

GIGLIOLA  Ninety-seven.

*(Meaningful gesture of GUGLIELMO)*
CUCURULLO  I would give anything for an end like that.

GIGLIOLA  She could thread a needle without glasses.

COUNTESS  Whether she could thread it or not, a mother is always a mother and when she leaves us, whether she is a hundred or two hundred, only then is one really widowed.

GIGLIOLA  How right, my Maria, you always are!

COUNTESS  Now, tell me something: if, as you say, the news is that bad... forgive me, but I love you and I have to be cruel.

GIGLIOLA  Go ahead.

COUNTESS  Did you try to find out whether he thought of leaving something in writing?

GIGLIOLA  Nothing, he did not want to write anything. When I tried to find out, hinting at the topic, he said that what he was supposed to write had already been written in the laws and, he added: “A written will can be impugned, but the one that has only been thought of, will remain closed in the tomb together with the dead person.”

PICIOCCA  I didn’t really understand that.

CUCURULLO  Neither did I.
COUNTESS I smell a rat. Are you sure he did not write anything down?

GIGLIOLA *(Pulling out of her blouse a piece of paper folded in four)* Here. *(Showing it)* This is all he wrote. *(Reading)* “When I die, I want to be taken to the cemetery naked and I want to be buried naked. Do not take advantage of the fact that I can’t do anything and put me in the same ridiculous position my father-in-law found himself on his death bed – all made up and in an evening suit, that one might have wondered: is he going to the cemetery or to a ball? So, we are clear on that: naked I came into this world and naked I want to be buried. Many thanks and greetings – signed: Thing, Stick, Flower-vase, Candleholder. Do you understand now? *(She folds the paper and puts it away.)*

COUNTESS He went crazy.... Poor Gigliola.

PICIOCCA And will you abide by his wishes?

GIGLIOLA *(Unsure)* Well… you understand....

COUNTESS That is absurd.

CUCURULLO “Naked I came into this world, naked I want to be buried….”

PICIOCCA It’s impossible. He was well known, can you imagine how many people will come to see him.

COUNTESS It would be a scandal. How can one compare the situation of when one is born with the one when one dies after about seventy years?
GIGLIOLA But the last wishes have to be carried out....

COUNTESS Will talk about it when the time comes. Now, tell me the truth: did you eat anything?

GIGLIOLA I had coffee with milk and a couple of cookies.

COUNTESS I brought you a roasted chicken. *(She shows it still wrapped in paper.)* It’s still warm. And a bottle of Chianti.

PICIOCCA I brought you nice fruit. *(She shows her a packet she has.)*

CUCURULLO And I brought you dessert. *(She too shows her gift.)*

GIGLIOLA Oh, you are such dears.

COUNTESS How about the priest? Is he still refusing any and all religious comforts?

GIGLIOLA He is so stubborn. He says he did not do anything bad and therefore he has nothing to tell anybody.

COUNTESS If you want I can talk to Father Ragusa. After the demise of Father Cannicchio who had assisted our family for many years, he’s the one who now comes to get our souls.
GIGLIOLA Nooo.... Father Ciccuzza would take offense. He is such a friend of the family; he'd take it badly if somebody else came for Guglielmo’s soul. I hope it will be Guglielmo himself who will ask for him.

COUNTESS We’ll see. Now let's take advantage that your husband is resting and go and eat this chicken before it gets cold. Come on let’s go. (All four stand) You have to keep up your strength.

PICCIOLLA (Following behind GIGLIOLA and the countess) She got so thin.

CUCURULLO Of course, night after night.

(The four ladies exit.)

(When the chattering of the four ladies has faded away into the nearby rooms, only then, will GUGLIELMO, certain of having been left alone, stretch his arms and abandon himself to an almost savage yawn. He gives a look around, shows signs of unbelievable boredom for everything that surrounds him, from the furniture to the walls; in the end, he picks up a book, opens it to where he had placed a bookmark and, between yawns, turns the pages disinterestedly. Suddenly he stops reading, and pays attention since he thinks he hears a voice nearby who has pronounced very quickly, almost whispering, his name.)

VOICE Don Guglielmo! (GUGLIELMO is very surprised but thinking he has perhaps heard incorrectly, he tries to listen more carefully. The voice, even lower than before, repeats once again the name GUGLIELMO) Don Guglielmo!
GUGLIELMO (Alarmed) Who is it?

(This time the head of a priest, in a festive mood, appears behind GUGLIELMO's shoulders, right above the back of the armchair.)

CICCUZZA Don Gugliè, it’s Father Ciccuzza. (GUGLIELMO’s mood darkens, he closes his book and his eyes and he leans his head once again back onto the armchair) Don Gugliè, did you hear me, or are you more there than here? (GUGLIELMO doesn’t answer) Don Gugliè, are you purposely refusing to answer me or are you in a coma? (GUGLIELMO as above) Don Gugliè, I need to know this. Because if you’re deliberately not answering me I’ll somehow force you to answer my questions and I’ll be doing it for your own good…. On the other hand, if you’re doing it because you’re in a coma, I’ll still ask you the questions and whether the answers come or not, it’s really all the same for the task at hand. So, are you in a coma or not? (GUGLIELMO as above) Don Gugliè, make an effort, answer my questions. You’re not just anybody. During your lifetime you have received honors and glory, and so you should give thanks to Providence for having given you intuition, intelligence and the strength to fight. (GUGLIELMO as above) Don Gugliè, the world does not want to be disappointed in seeing your hostile attitude toward the divine law. You don’t want to answer? All right then: it means that I will have to continue on my own. (He moves a chair next to the armchair and sits down.) My son, we are all sinners. You, blessed child, were certainly no saint. This is a well-known fact, and so before leaving this mortal coil behind, you must repent for the way you have behaved. Confess your sins, brother. The Lord is great and merciful and he will welcome you among his angels as a lost sheep. (GUGLIELMO stares at the priest, arching his eyes with an ambiguous smile.) Good, smile and don’t answer. That’s all you can do, brother. Don’t speak, I’ll do
everything. (*He makes the sign of the cross.*) In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. (*And with his thumb he marks GUGLIELMO’s forehead, he then starts an indiscernible prayer at the end of which he crosses himself again and crosses the forehead of GUGLIELMO.*) Amen. I bless you on earth and absolve you of your sins, my son, but remember that in heaven there will be another tribunal that will judge you. (*Hearing of yet another inescapable exam even after death GUGLIELMO looks upwards with heavy eyes, lowers his head, and then widens his arms as though accepting the inevitable.*)

(*The dark velvet curtains close, while from inside a chorus of students can be heard. From the front of the wings, both on the right and the left, two groups of persons enter: a bourgeois group from one side and a working class group from the other; they remain serious, speaking in a low voice about the funeral which is about to take place. The chorus of students moves further away, until it stops completely when the black velvet curtains open, revealing a large door, half closed but visible and aristocratic, from the end of the seventeenth century. In front on the right side there is a rectangular table, of medium size on which there is a book for the participants to sign and a few pens. CHIARASTELLA, the doorman, comes out from inside the courtyard together with an important neighbor, with whom he is recalling the positive and negative qualities of that “good soul” of GUGLIELMO SPERANZA. Once he is on the street, the important neighbor reaches the group of bourgeois people, he exchanges greetings with some of them and not stepping on anybody’s toes, he gets in line. CHIARASTELLA places the table with the book for the signatures on it.*)
(An orderly agitation is established among the two groups as CHIARASTELLA imitating the authority of an orchestra director, hearing a racket coming from the stairs, warns those present that the dead man is arriving. Immediately all eyes from both groups focus on every minute detail that shall determine a good or bad outcome of the funeral ceremony. CHIARASTELLA, in a relaxed and able manner undoes the heavy bolt and sets the front door wide open. From the back of the courtyard arrives the slow and somber procession: FORTUNATO and FELICE in front and two men riding the horses carrying the hearse behind form a quadrangle with the dead man in the center who follows everything wide awake. GUGLIELMO’s dying wish has not been granted: they have dressed him! They have put on him a very flashy old black tie trimmed with satin; white vest, black tie, and shiny shoes. VALENTINO, the barber, has added the finishing touches: he has shined and slicked back his hair, so that it appears almost painted on GUGLIELMO’s skull, made up his eyes, put eyeliner on his eyebrows and lipstick on his lips and reddened his cheeks.)

(Following this formation there is GIGLIOLA, all dressed up, held up by her daughters-in-law and by the COUNTESS MARIA DELLE GRAZIE. On either side of her there are her friends: PICIOCCA and CUCURULLO. The maid walks alongside the doorman. As soon as they reach the street, the procession stops so that the groups of friends can express their condolences to the widow and to the relatives of the deceased. The bourgeoisie surround GIGLIOLA expressing the appropriate words for the occasion. The working class people observe, sympathize and are moved by what they see. Only now, within the group that surrounds the Speranza family is FURIO LA SPINA visible, for the occasion he is wearing a black suit, black gloves, black tie, and hard black hat. The suit is quite worn and seems large for his frame.)
(With the authority he carries from having been best man at the Speranza wedding, LA SPINA, after kissing the hands of GUGLIELMO, the COUNTESS, and the friends, holds the widow in a tight embrace and gazes intently into her eyes with a look as though he is trying to sum up in a single minute an entire life spent together. Ending the embrace, LA SPINA, reaches the tail of the funeral procession, stops there and takes the obligatory stance of someone about to read a funeral eulogy.)

FURIO

(Unfortunately, the very moment he decides to start his speech, his inspired look meets the amused look of the “dead man” and for an instant he is taken off guard, but then he recovers and starts) Guglielmo Speranza is dead. (From this moment on and for the entire duration of the speech GUGLIELMO and FURIO will exchange meaningful looks) We all: the wife, the children, the grandchildren, relatives and faithful friends – among these allow me to place myself first – are confused, devastated and broken hearted. We have gathered around him to repeat unbelievingly, and with that silent language which best characterizes the funeral climate: Guglielmo Speranza is dead…. We will never forget that great man of culture, who managed to reach the apex of his profession, the respect gained from his colleagues, the wide recognition both here and abroad. I also want to recall what an exemplary husband and father he was and how wisely he was able to conduct his family life. Furthermore, let’s not forget that “bonarious” attitude, he always had, when he listened generously to the misfortunes of the poor. (Here there are cries from the working class people gathered) He loved his family and was loved in return. A two-way love can bear unexpected fruits. It was the love, admiration, and devotion that he had for Girolamo Fortezza which then moved the illustrious professor to take his son-in-law under his wing, to protect him, push him, and pave his way to success. This innocent truth, which was soon common knowledge,
often irked the serenity of Guglielmo Speranza, it was the only cloud over the friendly relations between father-in-law and son-in-law. Then with the passing of Girolamo Fortezza, along with the offended pride, so too his enthusiasm and ambition disappeared. He was overcome with sadness, perhaps remorse and repentance. Poor Guglielmo, he will no longer be able to tell us! Tonight, however, when this street is covered in darkness in the late hours of the night, two shadows will be hovering around this building: the solemn and decided one of Girolamo Fortezza and the uncertain, wavering one of Guglielmo Speranza. When the two shadows meet in front of this doorway, both with a single bound will cling to each other, once again reunited in the silence of all eternity.

(Cries, tears, and embraces between the bourgeois group and the members of the Speranza family. The procession is formed once again and moves on. This time it is Furio alone to hold up GIGLIOLA. Strangely enough, GUGLIELMO does not feel the sense of ridicule that he was afraid, when he was alive, he would feel as a dead man. On the contrary, he is amused, he feels he is at the center of a game that is so childish that he almost takes it as one of the most amazing and bizarre gifts humanity could concede to man. To all those he encounters on the way, he smiles, waves, and greets with a casual demeanor. Finally the procession disappears behind the wings.)

GIACINTO (Closing the large entrance door and speaking to the Speranzas’ maid) And another book is closed! Speaking of books ... honey, give me a hand; let’s get rid of this table. (Together with the girl he lifts the table to take it away, but the two stop upon hearing from the inside an anxious voice yelling out.)
VOICE  
(From inside) Wait, wait! Please, one minute… (With a quick step and labored breath, from the wing opposite to that where the procession has exited, two latecomers arrive, perhaps friends of the Speranzas.)

FIRST LATECOMER  
Don’t take away the register, please.

SECOND LATECOMER  
Just a minute, first let us sign it.

GIACINTO  
You’re the boss, go ahead and sign.

FIRST LATECOMER  
Has the procession already left?

GIACINTO  
Of course. You’re quite late....

FIRST LATECOMER  
Partly because my watch is slow, partly because of the traffic....

GIACINTO  
Five minutes earlier and you would have made it.

SECOND LATECOMER  
(After signing the book) I’m sorry I didn’t give my condolences to the sons… we are friends.

FIRST LATECOMER  
(Signing as well) And to the widow… was it a nice funeral?

GIACINTO  
(Not very satisfied) Well, so so. Don Girolamo Fortezza’s, now that was a funeral.
SECOND LATECOMER The truth is that in these last few years Guglielmo Speranza let himself be forgotten.

GIACINTO He lived in a very reserved manner.

FIRST LATECOMER Now if he had died fifteen years ago... (Toward his friend) remember when he was on top of his game, in all his glory, and all the papers talked about him....

SECOND LATECOMER Newspapers, magazines....

FIRST LATECOMER He just didn’t know how to die. (Toward CHIARASTELLA) Were there lots of people at the funeral?

GIACINTO (As he starts removing the table again with the assistance of the Maid) Not so many, not so many....

(GIACINTO CHIARASTELLA and the MAID disappear behind the doorway, carrying the table away, and the two latecomers go out as the curtain falls.)
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